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THE FIGHT FOR THE CROWN

A Novel

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BY

W. E. NORRIS

AUTHOR OF "BILLY BELLEW" "CLARISSA FURIOSA"
"THIRLBY HALL" "ADRIAN VIDAL" ETC.



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1898

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By W. E. NORRIS.

CLARISSA FURIOSA. Post Svo, Cloth, \$1 50.
BILLY BELLEW. Ill'd. Post Svo, Cloth, \$1 50.
MARCIA. Svo, Paper, 40 cents.
A MAN OF HIS WORD 4to, Paper, 20 cents.
ADRIAN VIDAL. Ill'd. 4to, Paper, 25 cents.
THIRLBY HALL. Ill'd. 4to, Paper, 25 cents.

NEW YORK AND LONDON:
HARPER & BROTHERS, PUBLISHERS.

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M. B. S. 8/14/38

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THE FIGHT FOR THE CROWN

THE FIGHT FOR THE CROWN

CHAPTER I

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

“INDEED, then, you know nothing about it, any of you—nothing at all.”

It was upon the steps of the Kildare Street Club, at Dublin, on a fine May afternoon, that this comprehensive judgment was pronounced, good-humoredly enough, by a tall, handsome gentleman of something over middle age, and that he meant it to comprehend a considerable number of persons was proved by his adding, presently :

“And if there’s one Englishman who knows less than others—less even than the late Chief Secretary, of doleful memory—you will find him under the hat of Mr. Gladstone.”

The young fellow addressed modestly hastened to disclaim participation in the possibly culpable ignorance of the Prime Minister. His own, he submitted, was at least of a less presumptuous order, and was therefore entitled to commiseration rather than open to censure.

“I don’t set up to know anything about it,” he

remarked. "That's why I'm here. I have come over to Ireland to be enlightened."

"Have you, now?" returned the other, with a twinkle in his gray eye. "From your uncle's letter I supposed that you had come over to amuse yourself, and to be an ornament of the Viceregal Court, and to hunt with the Meath next winter, like the other young men. But if you contemplate becoming a serious politician, and if you want, just by way of making a small start, to fathom what English politicians call the Irish question—"

"Oh, it isn't so serious as all that," the other rejoined, smiling. "Still, I confess that I should like to go a little deeper into the business than I have gone yet. I should like, if I might be allowed, to hear what there is to be said on both sides."

"Then, my dear Mr. Elles, God help you! Anyway, you shouldn't apply for help to a poor devil of an Irish landlord, who has nothing to say for himself except that, in his opinion, what is his own ought to belong to him—which, of course, is absurd. You'll hear as much as you can wish to hear, and more than I should have thought that anybody out of Parliament could wish to hear, from other people: it isn't for the likes of us to speak! Suffer we must, and shall, whether Whigs or Tories are in office; so we may as well suffer in silence."

But apparently it was not in literal silence that Mr. Power was prepared to submit to the wrongs inflicted upon his class; for, now that his lips had been opened upon a subject which, to do him justice, he seldom cared to broach, he could not close them without a few bitter comments upon the

policy, past and present, of the then existing administration.

“I’d be sorry to say an uncivil word about the enlightened statesmen whom your uncle admires and supports with his vote, but it seems to me that any half-dozen lunatics out of the nearest asylum would do their work over here quite as satisfactorily. To fill their prisons with suspects is one way of governing a country, and maybe there are worse ways, supposing that you can contrive to arrest the right people. But what has Forster done?”

“Oh, well,” the younger man ventured to interpolate, “it’s admitted, I presume, that the wrong people were collared; the release of the political prisoners from Kilmainham is an admission of that, and the understanding, of course, is that a new policy is to be begun.”

“A pretty sort of a policy, and a pretty sort of an understanding! Mr. Parnell is to turn away from the wickedness which he has committed, and to do that which is lawful and right, so that he may save the Liberal Ministry alive, is he? Well, we shall see. If you imagine that Mr. Parnell can get on without American dollars, and if you think that dollars are sent over to support constitutional agitation— But where’s the good of talking? As I told you just now, we landlords are between the devil and the deep sea, and perhaps we might as well be moonlighted as legally plundered. Only you may take it from me that your precious new policy will neither stop outrages nor earn you the gratitude of a single Irishman, friend or foe. I know my countrymen!”

Possibly he did, and certainly Wilfrid Elles's acquaintance with them was as yet too slender to enable him to forecast the results of a policy of conciliation. His observations, however, so far as they had gone, had disposed him towards a sanguine view; for he had just witnessed and taken part in the state entry of the new Lord Lieutenant, who had been received with a cordiality bordering on enthusiasm. Himself a modest and supernumerary member of the Viceregal household, his attendance on that occasion, and at a season of the year when Dublin Castle is not wont to dispense hospitality, might have been excused; but his uncle, who had obtained the post for him, had wished him to see the dawn of a reign fraught with bright promises, and he had been very willing to gratify his uncle. Who, indeed, except a born fool, would be unwilling to gratify a childless uncle of advanced years, great wealth, and no small political influence? Wilfrid had been pretty plainly given to understand that, if he continued to behave himself, he would some day inherit the bulk of what his uncle had to bequeath, and he had hitherto behaved himself satisfactorily enough. Moreover, he was really a good deal interested in the actual condition of Irish affairs, to the study of which he brought an impartial mind. It is delightfully easy to be impartial when one is neither a member of the House of Commons nor a person whose life and property are liable to be endangered by parliamentary vagaries.

“Besides,” reflected Wilfrid, who was as much of a Liberal as a public-school and university education had suffered him to be, “it isn't exactly our busi-

ness, I suppose, to make things pleasant for the landlords."

This Mr. Power, to whom he had brought a letter of introduction from his uncle, and who had, with great promptitude and cordiality, invited him to dinner that evening, might or might not be a good landlord, but he seemed at any rate to be a pleasant old gentleman, and would doubtless have further information of a more or less amusing nature to impart. Meanwhile, there was an hour or so to be got through ; for Lord Spencer, immediately after the ceremony of installation, had left for the Viceregal Lodge, where Mr. Elles's services were not required, and the young man's time was entirely his own in a city where he was a complete stranger. So he followed his nose, and looked about him.

It is possible to become very much attached to Dublin, and officers who have been quartered there generally do—if they happen to be hunting-men—speak of the place in terms of affection ; but nobody can pretend that its streets wear that aspect of gayety and prosperity which is apt to attract the casual visitor. Wilfrid Elles, who was to all intents and purposes a mere visitor, and who was amiably inclined to receive favorable impressions, found it quite out of his power to be favorably impressed. It was not that so many of the thoroughfares were dirty, the pavements narrow, and the houses mean ; that much might be said of a great part, if not the greater part, of London. But London, for all its gloom, squalor, and ugliness, looks alive, rich, and busy, whereas Dublin has the listless, poverty-stricken air of a capital which has seen its best days, and does not expect

to see them back again. It was that air—whether real or imagined—of dull resignation which chiefly struck this Anglo-Saxon explorer, and even caused him a slight sense of personal discomfort, as representing the conquering race which had known so ill how to deal with its conquests.

Like most young Englishmen, he had been taught to regard the Irish as a rebellious people, against whom it was necessary to employ force from time to time, yet merry withal, delighting in rows rather for the fun of the thing than out of rancor towards anybody, and prone to enjoy life after a reckless, out-at-elbows, devil-may-care fashion. But, somehow or other, they and their metropolis did not, at first sight, appear to correspond in the least to such pre-conceived notions. The poorly furnished shops, the scarcity of equipages, the all-pervading stagnation seemed to tell a tale of prolonged misgovernment and smothered discontent which would have been more appropriate in Warsaw; the passers-by met the gaze of the inquiring stranger—or he fancied that they did—with sullen, unfriendly side-glances. And this was really rather disappointing of them, considering that the gates of Kilmainham had been flung open, that there was to be no more talk of buckshot or of arrests on suspicion, and that the Land Act was about to be amended.

But if Grafton Street and Dame Street were thus coldly repellent, what was to be said of the by-ways round about the frowning Castle and the banks of the Liffey, whither Wilfrid presently wandered? There was something more than melancholy, something positively sinister and menacing, in the silence

of those long quays on either side of the evil-smelling river and the monotonous row of dilapidated dwellings which looked down upon them through broken and unclean windows; it had to be admitted that something must be seriously amiss with a country whose chief city exhibited a countenance of that description.

However, it was agreed by everybody that there was something seriously amiss with Ireland, and wrong cannot be put right in a day, and better times were at hand. Wilfrid took comfort from these reflections, and from the memory of Lord Spencer's reception by the populace a few hours before. He was also rather glad to think that his own stay in Dublin would for the present be a brief one. He strolled on as far as the entrance of the Phoenix Park, and would have prolonged his walk had not a glance at his watch warned him that it was already time to go back and dress. Mr. Power had apologized for naming so early an hour as half-past seven for dinner, but had pleaded that at his age he could not do without a good night's rest, and that he was obliged to leave for his home in Kerry by the six-o'clock mail-train on the following morning.

As Wilfrid turned to retrace his steps, an outside car, on which were seated four men, besides the driver, dashed past him and entered the park. One of these men had evidently just made a joke at which the others were laughing uproariously, and Wilfrid felt quite grateful to them for being so merry and jolly. They, at all events, looked more like typical Irishmen than anybody whom he had as yet encountered—a good deal more so than the grave occupants

of a four-wheeled cab which followed in their wake. He happened to notice their faces, especially that of the driver of the second vehicle, which was the reverse of prepossessing. He was to see and recognize some of them at a later date and under different circumstances; for the moment they only interested him by reason of the contrast which their respective expressions chanced to offer. Subdued ferocity, anxious distrustfulness, careless good-humor; were not these, perhaps, the outward and visible signs of the actual state of Irish feeling?—a state of feeling which, after all, was the not unnatural outcome of recent attempts to enforce law and order. It might be worth while to ascertain from Mr. Power which of the above conditions predominated, in his opinion, among his fellow-countrymen.

But Mr. Power, when once more joined at his club by the guest to whom he had so readily extended hospitality, flatly refused to be drawn into further political conversation.

“Would you spoil my appetite for me and ruin my digestion?” he asked. “Find out for yourself, if you can, what’s wrong with this unhappy country; wiser men than you or I have been puzzling their brains over it for God knows how many years past, and I don’t see that they are much nearer the finish than they were when they started. I’ve told you what I think about this new departure, and I’ll tell you no more—except that Mr. Gladstone will have to fall back upon coercion before the winter. Poor as I am, I’m prepared to back my opinion, with a trifle of odds, on that point.”

He spoke somewhat irritably, but ended with a

laugh, and immediately changed the subject to one about which he could talk with greater freedom and more enjoyment. That young Elles was a sportsman he had quickly divined, and he himself had plenty to say respecting hunting, shooting, fishing, racing, and coursing, at all of which happy and healthful pursuits he had won distinction in his day.

“And whatever poor old Ireland may be,” he wound up by declaring, “it remains the grandest country in the whole world for sport. I wonder, now, did you bring a salmon-rod over with you? You did not? Well, that’s no matter, for I’ve several of my own—not to mention that the boys are at home just now—and if you would come and stay a week or a fortnight with us at Rathfinnan, we would do the best we could for you in our rough household. It has been a rough household since my poor wife died, and there isn’t too much money to keep it going nowadays; but we can promise you a hearty welcome, anyhow.”

This kindly invitation was given after dinner, by which time entertainer and entertained had discovered that they had many tastes in common, and Wilfrid, who had intended returning to London in the course of a few days, but had no special reason for hurry, was prevailed upon without much difficulty to alter his plans. He said it was “awfully kind” of Mr. Power, and indeed he thought it was; but the latter assured him, with every appearance of sincerity, that any one who now consented to visit Rathfinnan Abbey conferred a genuine favor upon the denizens of that partially closed mansion.

“We’ll make no difference at all for you; you’ll

get neither champagne with your dinner nor port after it—indeed, I wouldn't swear that there's a bottle of champagne left in the cellar, and, upon my life, I'm afraid to look! But it'll be a queer day when we can't offer something in the shape of board and lodging to a friend who isn't over-particular."

So it was arranged, after some further parley, that Wilfrid should travel south in a day or two, and at ten o'clock the young man, mindful of Mr. Power's hint, took his leave. As he entered the Castle, where he, together with some other members of the Viceregal household, was temporarily domiciled, he encountered a young aide-de-camp, Douglas by name, whom he knew well, and who was hastening downstairs with his hands full of papers.

"Come and smoke, old man," said Wilfrid, "and don't try to look as if you were weighed down by the cares of government already. There can't be any very important despatches to send off on a Saturday night."

The other turned a pale and perturbed face towards him.

"Haven't you heard?" he asked.

Wilfrid shook his head smilingly.

"What's up now?" he inquired. "Any more murders?"

"By George, yes!—and I wouldn't laugh, if I were you. Lord Frederick Cavendish and Burke, the Under-Secretary, were stabbed to death in broad daylight just opposite the Viceregal Lodge a few hours ago. His Excellency and Colonel Caulfield, who were standing at one of the windows, actually saw it happen, I believe."

“Good God!” ejaculated Wilfrid. “What an awful thing! Have they caught the fellow?”

“Who—the assassin? No; and aren’t likely to catch him, or rather them; for it seems that there were three or four of them. Oh, they’ll escape, you may take your oath of that! They have the whole country at their backs.”

“But who are they supposed to be?”

Douglas shrugged his shoulders impatiently.

“Some cursed Fenians or other, of course. The police profess to have information, but it won’t come to anything, you’ll see. Well, I must be off.”

He turned on his heel, but presently wheeled round, his handsome young face ablaze with wrath.

“So much for making terms with a lot of seditious scoundrels!” he cried. “I hope your friend Gladstone will understand now that there’s only one thing to be done with the people of this d—d island, and that is to put them under martial law.”

CHAPTER II

RATHFINNAN ABBEY

AT this distance of time it is easy enough to see that the stupid and purposeless crime which followed Lord Spencer's appointment to the Irish viceroyalty in 1882 could not possibly have been instigated by the recently liberated prisoners of Kilmainham, who had everything to lose and nothing to gain by such an outrage. But on the spot and at the moment dispassionate judgment could hardly be looked for, and Captain Douglas was not the only man who thirsted for prompt measures of retaliation. Wilfrid Elles, for his part, could not but share the convictions of those about him, and those about him, during the day of agitation and excitement which followed, were officials, permanent and temporary, who professed to have known all along how it would be. A generous attempt had been made to pass the sponge over the blood-stained records of past years and to meet the men who styled themselves patriots half way. This was the swift and dramatic reply, if not of those men in person, at all events of their followers. What more forcible proof could have been given of the truth of the oft-repeated saying that Irishmen are, of all people in the world, the most dangerous to run away from ?

“My dear sir,” said an old office-holder who had seen many viceroys come and go, and who was himself of Irish birth and breeding, “one of two alternatives must be correct : either Mr. Parnell can prevent crime or he can’t. If he can, he is responsible ; if not, where was the good of making terms with him ?”

It certainly did not seem as if much had been gained by that alleged compact, nor could so young a man as Wilfrid readily suppress the natural desire to take vengeance upon somebody for a murder which was without the slightest provocation or excuse. Martial law ? Well, why not ? The most elementary duty of a government is to protect law-abiding citizens, and arrest malefactors when it can lay hands upon them. If ordinary methods of arresting and punishing malefactors fail, recourse must needs be had to extraordinary methods, and those best qualified to speak were unanimously of opinion that the complicity of thousands would enable these particular malefactors to make good their escape. “There will be no informers this time,” Wilfrid was told. “One hundred thousand pounds wouldn’t buy a man whom we should have to keep in solitary confinement for the rest of his days if we wanted to save his life.”

For the rest, the attitude and sympathies of the populace remained inscrutable to an uninitiated spectator. A great deal of emotion was displayed, and signs of mourning were visible everywhere, but it was impossible to say how far the vast crowds which thronged the Phoenix Park on that memorable Sunday afternoon to view the scene of the tragedy were moved by abhorrence of the deed which had been

done. Wilfrid and Douglas mixed with them, studied their faces, and came to the conclusion that they were highly excited, a little frightened, and a little exultant. That, no doubt, was unjust; in all probability the crowd, like other crowds, was conscious chiefly of mere curiosity. Yet many of the women shed tears freely.

“H’m!” growled Douglas, “if they’re sorry, let them prove their sorrow by doing what they can to help the police. That isn’t asking too much of them, I should think.”

It was perhaps asking a good deal. In any case, neither the reward of ten thousand pounds for information leading to the conviction of the criminals, which was publicly offered on the morrow, nor the numerous arrests which were made during the course of the week proved successful, and the unavoidable inference was that a considerable number of persons must know more than they chose to reveal.

“When all is said,” thought Wilfrid, “men with knives about them and blood on their clothes can’t get away from a frequented thoroughfare on a fine May evening without being seen. Even granting that they had no blood on their clothes, which is very unlikely, they must have been noticed either when they entered the park or when they left.”

He himself had seen them, as it happened; but he had forgotten the merry fellows on the outside car who had for a moment attracted his attention, and it did not occur to him to accuse the heedlessness of the average wayfarer rather than suspect a general conspiracy of silence.

As for ruling Ireland by means of a truce with the

ex-Land Leaguers, that experiment was pronounced by all with whom Wilfrid was brought into contact to have failed before it had come into operation; nor did the manifesto, denouncing the assassins, which was signed by Mr. Parnell, Mr. Dillon and Mr. Davitt, cause them to change their opinion that a strong Crimes Bill would have to be passed. As a matter of fact, such a measure was immediately introduced in the House of Commons, and seemed at first likely to meet with no opposition worth speaking of. Public indignation demanded nothing less, and it must be owned that public demands at that juncture smoothed the path of Right Honorable public servants. It is so simple and comfortable in a ticklish crisis to be able to revert, with the full approval of the electorate, to the good old argument of the stronger arm.

As for Wilfrid, he was fain to throw certain half-formed ideals and optimistic visions of his overboard—convinced that the Irish must needs be a subject race, and that they would be all the happier for being firmly held under subjection. Such, he presumed, were also the sentiments of Mr. Power, who, in a very kind letter, magnanimously refrained from crowing over him, and expressed a hope that the terrible event which had thrown the entire kingdom into mourning would not prevent him from fulfilling his promise to kill a few Kerry fish. There was no reason why it should: he was not required at Dublin, nor was he anxious to prolong his sojourn in the grim, half-deserted Castle.

So, one fine afternoon, it came to pass that Flurry Cregan, who united in his own person the responsible

offices of head coachman, stud-groom, and occasional footman to Mr. Power of Rathfinnan Abbey, was sent to the station to meet an English gentleman, whom he had no difficulty in identifying. The tall, fair-haired, good-looking, and carefully dressed young man who stepped out of the train could, of course, be no other than Mr. Elles, and Flurry smilingly hastened to introduce himself.

“The carriage is waiting for your Honor,” he announced. “And is there anny labels on your Honor’s boxes—the way I’ll know ’em?”

Wilfrid glanced at the little man in the threadbare, sky-blue livery, whose twinkling eyes and wide-grinning mouth provoked a responsive smile. If this was a sample of a Kerry native, he thought, he preferred Kerry manners to those of Dublin. And, indeed, Flurry’s manners were charming. When he had transferred Wilfrid’s portmanteau and other belongings to the carriage (which proved to be an ancient wagonette, drawn by a pair of wiry, fast-trotting little horses), and when he had turned out of the station gates on to the long, flat road, which stretched away towards the distant blue hills, he entered into conversation with an easy volubility which never degenerated into familiarity. He had a great deal to say about the shooting and the fishing, and very sorry he was that Mr. Elles was coming to Rathfinnan at the worst sporting season of the whole year. But the young gentlemen would do their best for him, and the lawn-tennis net had been put up, and there was grand scenery in the neighborhood. People came from America and all parts of the world to see it.

The scenery on either side of the level road along

which the wagonette was actually bowling could not be called grand, being, in fact, a vast expanse of bog, with here and there a whitewashed cabin, and here and there a patch of cultivation; but Rathfinnan Abbey, it appeared, stood on the lower spurs of the hills, some six or seven miles away, and looked out upon the as yet invisible ocean. Flurry described the natural beauties of the situation in superlative terms.

But there was nothing superlative, nor indeed anything positive, to be got out of this talkative fellow from the moment that some tentative observations were risked relating to the disturbed condition of the country. Upon that subject Flurry was evidently unwilling to enlarge. There had been bad times, he admitted; but he had been told that things were going to mend; he knew very little about it himself. Glory be to God, the master had never been under police protection yet! He had heard about the Dublin murders; but Dublin was a long way from Kerry; sure the government wouldn't be after proclaiming a district that had nothing to do with Dublin at all. He added, in reply to some further queries, which he appeared to resent, that not a hair of anybody's head at Rathfinnan was in danger; after which he drove on for nearly a mile without opening his lips.

Now, it might be true that the inhabitants of Rathfinnan Abbey were perfectly safe, but there were certain significant symptoms of their not despising measures of precaution. The park palings which bordered the road for some little distance were surmounted, Wilfrid noticed, by several strands of ugly

barbed wire, and when the wagonette drew up before an old stone archway the lodge-keeper did not at once throw open the massive iron-studded gates that closed it. By this time the light was failing, and a drizzling mist had set in, which obscured immediate surroundings, but which, according to Flurry, presaged fine weather for the morrow. A long avenue, mounting a gentle incline, led to some ivy-grown ruins, which were pointed out to Wilfrid as "the ould Abbey"; then a second gate gave access to the untidy, neglected space of flower-garden, which surrounded a low, rambling, modern structure, quite devoid of pretensions to architectural beauty. It seemed rather odd, and suggestive of a sense of insecurity, that the lower windows should be already shut and shuttered; but probably the reason why Wilfrid's ring at the door-bell remained so long unanswered was only that the servants' quarters were far away, and all but vacant. It was Mr. Power himself who eventually emerged to welcome his young friend, which he did with much heartiness.

"So here you are! I'm delighted to see you. Come in, my dear fellow, and have a glass of something to comfort you after the road. Flurry, you might drive round to the yard with the luggage. Well, I'm afraid you have had a wetting to introduce you to the county of Kerry, where it rains every day of the year, as some people declare. But this is not rain—only a breath of sea-fog to give us an excuse for lighting the smoking-room fire."

He led the way across an echoing, ill-lighted hall and down several corridors to the smoking-room, which, as Wilfrid afterwards found, was the only

one now used by the family out of a long suite of reception-rooms. Lofty, spacious, oak-panelled, and adorned with many trophies of the chase, it had a comfortable, inhabited air, and if the easy-chairs stood in obvious need of fresh upholstering, they were at all events many in number. From two of these a couple of long-legged, handsome youths, with pipes in their mouths, rose to greet the stranger, to whom they were presented by their father as "My boys, Jim and Denis."

They were simple, unaffected, not in the least shy, and they talked about the probable result of the coming Derby very much as their congeners in an English country-house might have done. Jim, the elder, had just passed out of Woolwich, it seemed, and expected soon to be sent away on foreign service; Denis, less fortunate, had failed to pass the necessary examinations for the army, and was now on the lookout for a land agency.

"Well, you're likely to be under fire quite as often in the one profession as in the other, by all accounts," Wilfrid remarked. But this leading observation of his only elicited a laugh and a prompt change of subject. For some reason or other everybody in Ireland appeared determined to withhold information from modest inquirers.

In other respects, however, the boys were as communicative as if they had been in the company of an old friend; and indeed Wilfrid almost felt as if he enjoyed that privilege by the time that he was conducted up-stairs to a bedchamber of vast proportions to dress for dinner. After he had effected the necessary change of costume and was descending the

broad staircase, which was very imperfectly lighted by a single small lamp, Mr. Power stepped out of the surrounding darkness and said :

“ You’ll forgive our not opening the drawing-room or the library for you ? To tell you the truth, our staff of domestics has been so much reduced that we’re bound to live in a small corner of this great rabbit-warren, if we’re to live here at all. In fact, you may call it a bachelor establishment nowadays, for I don’t count Nora, who isn’t ‘ out ’ yet, and her governess, Miss Rourke, never comes down to dinner.”

A few minutes later Wilfrid received the impression that if Miss Nora did not as yet count for much in her father’s estimation, she very soon would. For the lanky girl in the ill-fitting gown, who held out a sunburned hand to him, and whose age he judged to be sixteen or thereabouts, was evidently going to be very pretty. She was, indeed, extremely pretty already, with her black hair, plaited into a thick pigtail, her dark-blue eyes and her creamy complexion—all of which charming attributes appeared to accord to perfection with her name. It had, however, to be confessed that, for the time being, she was rather raw. She did not hold herself well ; her movements were clumsy, and, unlike her father and her brothers, she spoke with a very decided brogue. On the other hand, she resembled them in being entirely at her ease, and having plenty to say for herself. She took the head of the dinner-table and chatted volubly to the young Englishman, who, she assumed, had come to Kerry for the purpose of catching salmon. And she made bold to promise him

good sport. "Indade and indade," she assured him and her sceptical brethren, she had seen a twenty-pound fish rise in the upper river that same afternoon.

The talk during dinner was of fishing, and very little else. With dessert was brought in a kettle, and Miss Nora proceeded to mix four tumblers of hot whiskey punch.

"The custom of the country," Mr. Power explained, with a smile; "but there's no compulsion. Stick to the claret if you prefer it."

Wilfrid, being young and healthy, was afraid of nothing in the form of liquor; so he drank his tumbler of punch and pronounced it excellent, though he did not care to follow it up by quite so large a number of subsequent doses as his companions swallowed in the smoking-room after Nora had been sent off to bed. They themselves retired to bed at a comparatively early hour, and Wilfrid could not help noticing that each of them, before lighting his bedroom candle, took down a revolver from the rack above the mantel-piece.

"Another custom of the country," Mr. Power remarked, in response to an involuntary glance of interrogation on his guest's part. "In the bad times one didn't know what might or might not happen any night, so we got into the habit of being ready to defend ourselves. But there's no fear now, and you may sleep as soundly as if you were in Piccadilly. Aren't we under the protection of the Prime Minister and the Lord Lieutenant—and Mr. Parnell?"

CHAPTER III

NORA THE INTREPID

WHEN Wilfrid woke at an early hour the next day and, pulling up his blind, thrust his head out of the open window, he perceived, to his great satisfaction, that Flurry had been a true prophet. A more glorious morning could not have been desired, nor could a much more charming prospect than that which met the young Englishman's eyes have been discovered even in Kerry. The rain and the mists had been dispersed; wooded slopes, glittering with moisture, lay bathed in sunshine; there was a glimpse of falling water between the trees, and beyond them, at a distance of some two or three miles, stretched the calm, blue expanse of the Atlantic. In the foreground a herd of fallow deer (not yet sacrificed to enforced economy) were feeding, while above the ruins of the old abbey the rooks, with many circlings and cawings, were making ready for the business of the day. It was the sort of scene and the sort of weather to render mere existence a subject for gratitude.

“Oh, but that depends,” Mr. Power laughingly objected, when some such sentiment was propounded in his presence a few hours later. “An Irish landlord, I grant you, may well be thankful that he is

still alive ; but it by no means follows that his life is his own to do what he likes with. Here am I, for instance, obliged to drive all the way to Tralee and sit upon the bench this fine day, instead of walking up the river with you and seeing you land the big fish that Nora was bragging about last night. But the boys will take care of you."

"Oh yes, it's a beautiful place," he added, in answer to some further appreciative remarks of Wilfrid's. "I'll have to let it, I suppose. Nora must be sent away somewhere to finish her education, and Jim can't live upon his pay, and Denis owes a trifle, I suspect, and God knows whether there'll be any rents coming in yet a while. If you like Rathfinnan, you might tell your friends so when you go back to England ; maybe one of them would offer himself as a tenant."

Perhaps this suggestion was not very seriously made ; but if it had been, a tenant of sporting proclivities should be readily enough found. Such, at least, was the conviction of Wilfrid Elles when he sat down on the river's bank, after a highly successful morning, to examine the contents of the luncheon-basket which had been sent out to him and his two companions. The twenty-pound salmon had, to be sure, so far eluded him ; still he had done very fairly well, both on the lake and in the neighborhood of the pool beside which he was now resting, while the accounts that he had heard of the mixed shooting obtainable upon the property had made his mouth water. For snipe he already knew that the district in which Rathfinnan Abbey was situated was renowned, and from the bags which Jim and Denis claimed to

have made during past seasons he gathered that, what with wild-duck, woodcock, and grouse, not to mention ground game, a man who preferred shooting over dogs, in the old-fashioned style, to modern fashionable massacres might lead a happy life in Kerry pretty nearly all the year round. Moreover, the soft beauty of the distant coloring and the sensuous mildness of a climate in which the arbutus and the myrtle flourish appealed to him, as such adjuncts are apt to do at the luncheon hour.

“Oh, there are worse places,” said Jim, who was evidently gratified by the stranger’s encomiums upon his native land. “For the matter of that, there are worse people than our Kerry boys—the grandest people in the world, if only they were left alone!”

“If they were left alone by the agitators, do you mean?” Wilfrid asked.

“Well, the agitators and the priests and—and the Englishmen who think everything can be accomplished by an Act of Parliament, I suppose,” answered the other, with a slight laugh. “We’ve had to swallow a few more Acts of Parliament of late years than our weak digestions can stand, you see.”

But this was rather too near an approach to the forbidden topic, and the haste with which Jim proceeded to exhibit a salmon-fly of his own invention and manufacture was, no doubt, meant to be taken as a polite hint that they had not come out to engage in a political conversation.

Nevertheless, after fishing had been resumed, and when a tall, dark-complexioned youth, sauntering by, took his hand out of his pocket to touch his hat and wish their honors good sport, Jim remarked:

“That fellow would have taken no notice of us two or three months ago. He has had his orders, you may be sure.”

“From whom?” Wilfrid asked.

“From those who hope to see what is called coercion abolished. That boy was one of a gang who broke into our keeper’s cottage one night last winter and beat him within an inch of his life because he wouldn’t give them the guns that he hadn’t got. He’s civil enough now, you see.”

“Do you mean,” Wilfrid inquired, “that you know for a fact he had a hand in that outrage?”

“And in half a dozen others. Oh yes, I know it; I can’t prove it. And if I could have proved it, we shouldn’t have got a conviction. But I would shoot him as soon as look at him, and, fortunately, he is well aware of that.”

“He looks like a Spaniard,” remarked Wilfrid, scrutinizing the retreating figure of the young man, who at that moment glanced over his shoulder and smiled slightly, as though conscious that he was under discussion.

“Does he? He looks a good deal like a Kerry man; and, as I tell you, that’s saying no great harm of him. It’s a pity he isn’t quite deep enough in the chest for the constabulary; if he were, you wouldn’t want to have a more loyal servant at your back. As it is, I shouldn’t much care about meeting him on a dark night, unless I had a revolver in my hand.”

“In other words, he ought not to be at large?”

“Well, if you could put half the inhabitants of the district in prison and keep them there for a twelve-month, we should sleep rather more comfortably, I

dare say ; but you can't do that, and for the present they seem as though they meant to behave. Besides, I believe in their heart they are fond of the governor. I'm sure they ought to be !”

Neither then nor during several pleasant days which followed was Wilfrid able to ascertain in the least what relations subsisted between Mr. Power and his tenants. That some of the latter were miserable and poverty-stricken enough his walks and drives in the vicinity and occasional glimpses of their cabins convinced him ; some of them also looked a little “ crass,” as Flurry said, at the stranger. But, upon the whole, the need for having fire-arms handy was not very apparent. What was made apparent, and was, no doubt, somewhat significant, was that every member of the family was a first-rate shot, both with rifle and pistol. There was a target in the park which the young men amused themselves by defacing at odd moments, scoring bull's-eye after bull's-eye without, as it seemed, so much as taking the trouble to aim. Even Nora had been educated in this science, and was a proficient pupil. One afternoon, having obtained a half-holiday from Miss Rourke, a meek, elderly lady whose mission it was to obey rather than command, she was pleased to conduct Wilfrid down to the sea and prove herself incontestably his superior at hitting a floating bottle with a rook rifle. It was a knack, she told him, which he would easily acquire with a little practice, and she demurely hoped that he wasn't going to lose his temper about it when he laid the rifle down, with an impatient ejaculation, and acknowledged himself defeated.

“I never lose my temper, Miss Power,” he replied; “I keep it under the most admirable control, even when a young lady who might show a little more consideration is laughing at me in her sleeve.”

“I wouldn’t doubt you!” returned the girl; “aren’t you an Englishman? With us barbarians it is a word and a blow, and then there’s no ill-feeling the next day; but you are quite different.”

She added, after a short pause, “You are much more sensible than we are; but I’d sooner be Irish than English, all the same.”

“You don’t like us, I am afraid?” said Wilfrid, interrogatively.

“Oh, we hate you—and small blame to us! If you would take one side or the other, we should know at least whose friends you were; but to-day you’re for the landlords and to-morrow for the murderers and boycotters—and you condescend to all of us as if we were the dirt beneath your feet. How can you expect us to like you?”

She was so kind as to admit, however, that there were individual Englishmen whom she found herself able to tolerate, and to imply that her present neighbor was one of them. Had it been otherwise, indeed, she would scarcely have been seated beside him on those sun-warmed rocks, overlooking the long Atlantic swell; for she was evidently a young person whose decided views and tastes brooked no uncongenial companionship. Her invitation to Wilfrid—an invitation which, by reason of her tender age, could be given and accepted without demur—had not been extended to her brothers, who had gone off to fish from a boat on the lake, and presently she

candidly avowed her reasons for having solicited this private interview.

“I’d be glad to hear more about you ; for you’re not patronizing and conceited, like the other A.D.C.’s from the Castle who have come our way, and there’s no conversing in peace while those boys are in the way, chaffing and bothering. Won’t you give me an account of yourself now ?”

Wilfrid modestly replied that if he was not conceited, that was doubtless because he had not the shadow of an excuse for being so. He was afraid that there was nothing of an interesting character to be imparted respecting him, beyond the fact that he was a poor orphan. Perhaps that circumstance might commend him to the sympathy and compassion of the benevolent. But he was prevailed upon by further pressure to narrate the history of his past career—if that could be called a career which had included no profession, nor any adventures worth speaking of—and to admit that the adjective “poor” which he had applied to himself was not appropriate in a pecuniary sense. He had been at Eton and at Oxford, he had a small fortune of his own, he was not unlikely to inherit the large fortune at present enjoyed by his uncle, and he really had no very distinct ideas as to what he proposed to do with his life. If anything could be more commonplace than his past, he should imagine that that distinction might be claimed by his future.

In return he ventured to request a similar display of confidence on Miss Nora’s part, and she responded in a style far more amusing and original than he had been able to employ. She had been brought up, it

appeared, in virtual independence ; her education had been intrusted to a worthy woman whose own learning was of the slenderest description ; she had kept her eyes and ears open, had made observations and formed conclusions, and what was now very evident to her was that she would sooner or later find herself reduced to living by her wits.

“ Things are going from bad to worse,” she told Wilfrid ; “ the end of it will be that we shall have to shut up the dear old place and clear away out of the country. Then—but this is between ourselves, and you’ll say nothing about it, please—I mean to take to the stage. I know I can act, I’m sure I’d never make a decent governess, and I must do something ; so that’s my plan. What do you think of it ?”

Wilfrid, with a glance at the extremely pretty face of his questioner, thought that it would never be carried into execution. She was destined, he suspected, to escape the cares of poverty after a more ordinary and satisfactory fashion. But he only remarked that it would be necessary, he presumed, to obtain Mr. Power’s consent to the proposed scheme.

“ Is it my father’s consent ?” returned the girl. “ Ah, sure, he’d never give his consent to such a lowering of the family ! But you see,” she resumed, after a moment, with a humorous smile, “ he has had to submit already to a great deal that he wouldn’t have allowed, if he could have helped it. I think he’ll submit when he sees that I have pluck enough to insist.”

It was, at all events, not in pluck that Miss Nora was likely to prove deficient, and her possession of that valuable attribute was suddenly and dramatical-

ly made manifest while Wilfrid was drawing her attention to a few among the many considerations which render it difficult for a lady to become an actress.

“Ah, now, look at those gossoons,” she interrupted him by exclaiming. “Their mother should know better than to let them be out alone in the boat—and with the tide ebbing, too!”

Off the entrance of the creek above which she and Wilfrid were seated a small open boat had just come into sight, rising and falling with the swell. In it were a couple of ragged urchins, one of whom, lying flat upon his stomach, was holding a line over the stern, while the other, standing erect in the bows, was sculling with a single oar after the manner of a Venetian gondolier.

“I’ll be the death of that young thief!” cried Nora, indignantly.

And in truth her threat was nearer to being literally fulfilled than she meant it to be; for, on hearing himself shrilly hailed by name and ordered to come ashore that instant, the boy started violently, lost his balance, and fell headlong into the sea.

What followed took place with such rapidity that the whole thing was over before the on-looker, whose obvious duty it was to qualify for a Humane Society’s medal, had time to do more than gasp out a few unheeded remonstrances. Nora dashed down the sloping rocks like a goat, kicking off her shoes as she went, took a fine header, and in another moment had seized the sinking child, whom she held up in accordance with approved scientific principles.

“Don’t be worrying yourself !” she called out ; “ I can swim like any fish.”

She could do more than that ; for she actually contrived to scramble into the boat—a really marvellous feat, considering that she was weighed down by her soaked clothes—and to drag the boy after her.

Presently Wilfrid was assisting her to beach the boat, and had recovered his scattered wits sufficiently to be both angry and ashamed.

“What made you do such an insane thing ?” he demanded, reproachfully. “Why couldn’t you leave it to me ?”

She laughed.

“How did I know you could swim ? But there’s no harm done—except to my hat, which is on its way to America, and to my frock, which is in a ruin !”

She looked up at him with comic ruefulness. “I’ll never dare to face Rourke !” she declared. “Couldn’t you tell her that it was you pushed me into the water by accident ?”

“I decline to make any false statement,” Wilfrid replied ; “I don’t believe you have the slightest fear of Miss Rourke, or of anybody else. I shall tell the whole truth—and a pretty figure I shall cut when I tell it ! Meanwhile, you had better run home as fast as you can, while I restore these little wretches to their fond mother, who probably intended them to be drowned.”

CHAPTER IV

MR. FITZPATRICK

“You might go and fetch my shoes for me,” said Nora, after she had declared her intention of personally conducting the half-drowned boy and his brother home. “Just walk slowly along the road, and I’ll be with you in half a minute.”

Perhaps she did not wish him to accompany her to the miserable cabin by the shore towards which, as he presently saw from afar, she led the two children. He divined her reluctance to exhibit the nakedness of the land, and he did as he was told. As far as that went, he had no option but to obey; for it was plain that this young lady had never been brought under discipline, and she laughed at the orders which, in her father’s absence, he thought it his duty to give.

“Catch cold!” she echoed, scornfully, after she had joined him at the corner of the road, where he had waited five minutes or so for her; “I’d be ashamed of myself if I couldn’t wear wet clothes for a whole day without doing that! And don’t be saying ‘must,’ if you please, Mr. Elles, because that’s what nobody ever says to me.”

“So much the worse for you!” returned Wilfrid. “Well, I have no authority, so I can’t be held re-

sponsible for the consequences of your obstinacy. I hope you got a good scolding for so officiously saving that brat's life."

"I did not; I was thanked in far prettier language than you, or any other Englishman, would know how to use. Confess now that you're jealous, and that you can't forgive yourself for being dry while I'm dripping."

Wilfrid unhesitatingly made the confession demanded of him.

"Nevertheless," he pleaded, "my humiliation is more apparent than real. Of course I might have jumped into the sea after you, if there had been any necessity for it—do you think I ought to have done so?"

The girl laughed mischievously.

"There was no necessity," she replied; "only, if you had been an Irishman, you wouldn't have waited to find that out."

This was a hard saying, and a discussion which threatened to become acrimonious ensued as to the respective qualities of the Anglo-Saxon and Celtic races. Nora closed it by remarking:

"Well, I've made you angry, anyhow, and that's what I wanted to do. I told you a while ago that we Irish hate you, and I believe one of the chief reasons is that it is so hard to get you to lose your tempers. As for courage, nobody denies you that, and I'm sure you would have been in the water like a retriever dog if you had been wanted."

She was generously proceeding to give Englishmen credit for certain virtues which her own countrymen did not, according to her, possess when the

sound of rapidly approaching wheels on the high-road caused her to break off.

“Oh, glory!” she exclaimed, as a smart dog-cart hove in sight, “it’s Mr. Fitzpatrick. Heaven grant he doesn’t notice the mess I’m in!”

But a saturated young woman, without a hat and with her hair hanging loose, can hardly expect to escape attracting attention, and the spruce, well-dressed gentleman in the dog-cart raised his eyebrows questioningly as he drew rein.

“Hullo, Miss Nora!” said he, “did that salmon get you out of your depth before you landed him, then?”

“Are you on your way to the Abbey, Mr. Fitzpatrick?” the girl asked, disregarding his question.

“With your permission,” answered the other, as he descended, after handing the reins to the groom and telling him to drive on. “I observed your apprehensive glance at my portmanteau,” he added, laughing, “and I am sure your father has forgotten to tell you that he invited me to dine and sleep to-night.”

Nora threw up her hands in exaggerated dismay.

“Of course he never told me, bad luck to him! Well, fortunately, you won’t be starved; for, as you see, we’re already entertaining company. Perhaps you don’t know Mr. Elles?”

The new-comer, taking this as an introduction, raised his hat and smiled pleasantly. He was a good-looking, well-preserved, middle-aged man, with whom Wilfrid was well acquainted by reputation as member for an English constituency and an active opponent, in Parliament and elsewhere, of Home Rule.

On his side, he had heard of Wilfrid as belonging to the Viceregal household, so that they readily fraternized. On being informed of Nora's recent feat, he congratulated and eulogized her in appropriate terms; after which he made so bold as to suggest that the sooner she get into the dry clothes the less likely she would be to let herself in for an attack of congestion of the lungs. And this time the girl proved amenable to sage counsel. The truth was that she had no great love for her counsellor, who was a rich man, spending most of his time in smart society on the other side of St. George's Channel, and whom she suspected of looking down upon his Kerry neighbors.

But Mr. Fitzpatrick's remarks, after she had left him and Wilfrid and had run on towards the house, lent no confirmation to that theory.

"I never come back to Ireland," he said, "without being amazed by the self-possession and innate good breeding of these people, who never leave home, most of them, from year's end to year's end. That girl is fit to go to a drawing-room at Buckingham Palace to-morrow, and you may depend upon it that, if she did, she would carry herself a good deal better than the carefully-drilled daughter of the average English magnate. What a pity it is that Irish country gentlemen are upon the brink of ruin!—ruin caused by nothing but their own apathy too."

He dilated upon this topic on the way across the park. Land-owners in Ireland were menaced, he said, with extermination, not because they were vicious or inefficient—though some of them, no doubt, happened to be both—but because some scapegoats

had to be discovered to excuse the ignominious failure of successive ministries to pacify the country. As for driving or buying the landlords out and establishing a peasant proprietary, no crazier notion had ever found its way into the heads of Radical theorists.

“I have seen something of the southern countries where that system exists, and I tell you that, with a stationary population and every possible advantage of climate and soil, the peasants there can do no more than just keep alive. What do you suppose would be the result in the case of the Irish, who are notoriously prolific, who would be perpetually dividing their small holdings up into smaller ones, and who must always be at the mercy of the potato crop? I am sorry to say that I am old enough to remember the great famine. But nobody else seems to remember that between two and three hundred thousand human beings perished of hunger in that year. By all means put a stop to rack-renting and unjust evictions—the thing has been done—and let the bad landlords go to the devil. But at least we, who have tried to do our duty to our tenants, and are doing it too, should have grit enough to fight, shoulder to shoulder, for such rights as still remain to us.”

“I presume you will do that,” Wilfrid observed.

“Then you don’t know much about us. We shall squeal, like pigs being killed; but as for taking action, as for supporting one another, as for working together towards any definite end—well, I am afraid we are much more likely to cut one another’s throats.”

“Why?”

“Why?” returned Mr. Fitzpatrick, with a sudden flash of anger in his clear, gray eyes—“why, because we are rotten! Because every man Jack of us distrusts his neighbor; because some of us are afraid for our lives; because others drink too much whiskey; because—oh, well! for fifty miserable reasons, which I can’t go into. Upon my life,” he exclaimed, standing still and slapping his leg emphatically, “there are moments when I almost think Mr. Parnell and his crew are right, and that we deserve to be abolished, lock, stock, and barrel! What can men who won’t stand up for themselves expect, except defeat?”

But after this outburst, which perhaps relieved his feelings. Mr. Fitzpatrick laughed and waved away a subject in which he took it for granted that his auditor could feel no special interest. He could talk very well and agreeably upon other subjects; for he was a hunting man, a yachtsman, and a good shot, besides having travelled a great deal. The boys, who had returned from fishing, and who presently strolled out from the house to meet him, evidently had the highest admiration for his accomplishments, and he suited his conversation to his company without any apparent effort to do so, chatting good-humoredly and not unlike a boy himself about matters which they considered important.

During dinner, however, some remark of Mr. Power’s caused him to revert to his former theme, and perhaps the chilled and embarrassed silence that ensued provoked him into speaking more emphatically than he would otherwise have done. The landlords of Ireland, he declared, were fate to face with a con-

spiracy which had the forces of law and order, besides those of lawlessness, to back it. They must take a leaf from their opponents' book; they must unite and organize, unless they wanted to be wiped out. Their cause, taking it all round, was a good one: but no cause had ever yet triumphed from the mere fact of being good; it had to be supported by men, not mice. And so forth, and so forth, until Mr. Power, losing patience, gave vent to the exclamation which was in the hearts of many of his fellow-sufferers—

“Oh, it's fine to be you, Fitzpatrick! You don't depend upon your Irish estates, and if you never got another penny of rent out of them I don't suppose you would be put to any inconvenience worth mentioning. As for me, I am ready to defend my life and my property, if I am driven to it, as everybody hereabouts knows; but when you ask me to ruin myself for the sake of some rascally absentee, like—well, I needn't mention names—who would be shot the first day he dared to show his face in the country, all I can say is, I must take time to consider your suggestion. Call me a coward if you choose, but I want to know what other people are going to do before I commit myself.”

Mr. Fitzpatrick did not call his host a coward. He apologized for the warmth into which he had been betrayed, admitted that it was easier for him than for some of his neighbors to defy the lightning, and added that he had not a word to say in favor of certain hard-hearted absentees.

“Yet what you meant is that we may all of us be called upon to back them up,” Mr. Power observed.

Mr. Fitzpatrick acknowledged that that might conceivably become necessary. All concerted and defensive action was apt to entail the support of individuals who, as individuals, were not entirely meritorious.

“Ah, well, there you are! I admire your courage and your candor; but I’m not so sure that I am prepared to imitate them. Anyhow, as I say, I must take time for consideration.”

This, in all probability, was the answer which Mr. Fitzpatrick had been invited to Rathfinnan to receive. He told Wilfrid, later in the evening, that Mr. Power would most likely prove better than his word.

“He is one of the good specimens of his class—some of them are poor specimens enough, God knows!—and, in the long run, he will come to see that it is a case of ‘nothing venture, nothing have.’ But he wants to know, as they all want to know, ‘what other people are going to do.’ And when they hear, the odds are that they won’t believe! I give you my word that I myself should be half inclined to cave in, if I hadn’t taken this thing up and determined to see it through. More disheartening work no man ever put his hand to. Let us forget it for this evening. Now, is anybody going to play pool?” he asked, in a louder voice.

Nora, for one, was going to play. As a reward for her feat of the afternoon, the account of which, as given by Wilfrid, had highly delighted her father, she had been allowed to sit up till a rather later hour than usual, and she now showed herself such an adept in the use of the cue that she was the proud winner

of no less a sum than ten shillings when the time came for her to retire.

“Now I’ve won your money, and you can’t say that you saw me play for safety once !” she remarked, triumphantly, to Mr. Fitzpatrick, on wishing him good-night.

“My dear Miss Nora,” he returned, smiling, “you are an example to us all. But the worst of it is, as your father will tell you, that bright examples are more often applauded than imitated.”

CHAPTER V

FURTHER IMPRESSIONS

MR. FITZPATRICK'S powerful and well-groomed bay mare, nearly thoroughbred, brought his dog-cart round to the door soon after breakfast the next morning. He had promised, it seemed, to lunch with a neighboring squire, and to dine and sleep at the house of another. That he was making an informal tour of the southwestern districts for the purpose of promulgating his ideas, and, if possible, securing allies among those whom he desired to serve, was, indeed, scarcely a secret. If he had failed to obtain Mr. Power's co-operation, and if he was a little disappointed by that failure, nothing that could lend confirmation to such a surmise was perceptible in his manner when he took leave of his host, whom he cordially thanked for his hospitality, and hoped that he might meet again ere long. He quite expected, he said, to meet Wilfrid very shortly in London, whither his own parliamentary duties would necessitate his speedy return.

"An excellent fellow," Mr. Power remarked, watching the retreating dog-cart, as it passed from sunlight to shade, and from shade to sunlight, between the trees of the park. "If there were more like him, I wouldn't say that our case was hopeless yet. But

there aren't many like him. It stands to reason that there can't be."

"He is a good landlord, I suppose?" said Wilfrid, interrogatively.

"Oh, a model landlord. You'll find no property better managed than his in Ireland—and very few in England. And popular, I believe, as rich men who spend their money freely and wisely can't well help being. He is going, as far as I can judge, to lose his popularity, and a good deal of money, in addition to risking his life. That's why I call him an excellent fellow, instead of calling him a visionary fool."

Then, in reply to some deprecatory observation on the part of Wilfrid, whom Mr. Fitzpatrick had not struck as being by any means a fool, Mr. Power's repressed petulance exploded.

"What would you have me do? How the devil am I to live and keep my children alive without a penny of rent? I'm not situated as he is; I can't declare war unless I am provided with the sinews of war, and it's not fair to compare me and other land-owners with a man who is drawing a large annual income, of which nobody can deprive him, from invested capital. All the same, he is quite right, and we shall go to the wall because we are too weak to assert ourselves. I shall die in some squalid Swiss *pension*, I expect; but I want to hang on here for another year or two, if I possibly can. The time to start Denis on his own hook, you understand, and to present Nora at a Dublin drawing-room. That's what her mother wished, and I'm trying to take her mother's place as well as I can—which isn't too well. I'll have to get rid of Rourke, and send Nora to France to finish her

education immediately. I had a letter about it this morning."

The contents of the letter in question were communicated to Wilfrid later in the day by Nora herself. She joined him and her brothers that afternoon on the bank of the stream which they had been whipping for some hours without success, and, in response to her invitation, Wilfrid willingly enough took his rod to pieces, preparatory to seating himself beside her in the two-wheeled pony-cart which she was driving. She wanted to show him some samples of Kerry scenery, she said.

And, indeed, it was a charming drive that he had, that still warm afternoon, up hill and down dale, through fir plantations and woods of oak and arbutus. He often remembered it afterwards—the pattering of the brisk little pony's hoofs upon a soft road, the occasional glimpses of shimmering sea, between the boughs, a subtle aromatic fragrance in the air, and the girl's pleasantly-modulated voice, as she talked with candid simplicity of the prospect which lay before her. She was quite reasonable and sensible about it; she recognized that, much as she would hate the discipline and restrictions of a foreign school, these were an essential part of her training and could not well be dispensed with.

"It isn't as if I could afford to be a savage," she remarked. And then, turning her laughing face towards him, "Tell me, now—you would say that I talked with a pretty thick brogue, wouldn't ye?"

"I should say that you had a very pretty accent," was Wilfrid's politely evasive reply.

"Ah, well," she said, not much gratified, appar-

ently, by what had been meant for a compliment, "a good deal of that is put on, I'm a good mimic; I could talk very much like a London fine lady if I chose. But, of course, something more than mimicry is required. Deportment, self-confidence, a sort of familiarity with modern tricks, so that one wouldn't have to bother one's head about such details in studying one's part. Living here at the back of the bogs, I should never find out what I am sure I must know before I can hope to get an engagement at any theatre."

"I sincerely hope that you will never obtain a theatrical engagement," Wilfrid could not help saying.

"Thank you. That is as much as to say that you sincerely hope I shall starve. I am perfectly serious, I assure you; I don't believe a bit in Mr. Fitzpatrick. We may fight, and I daresay we shall; but that won't make the rents come in. So I mean to be independent of rents."

"Like that?—just by calling upon the manager of a theatre and demanding a big salary?"

"No; I shall have to show him that I am worth one. That's why I am so submissive as you see me; for really I am not the kind of girl whose father could pack her off to a Continental boarding-school against her will."

She was probably talking great nonsense; her father's obvious hope of finding a well-to-do husband for her during her first season was far more likely to be realized than were the crude and juvenile aspirations which she avowed. Yet there was something admirable—something attractive, anyhow—in her

courage, and in the calm reliance that she displayed upon such capacity as she might possibly possess. Wilfrid abstained from further dissuasion—it was, after all, not his business to undertake the work of time and circumstance, and, incidentally, while the girl prattled on, it was borne in upon him that a clearer head than Mr. Power's was above her shoulders. She foresaw the inevitable crash—a crash which would be brought about less by the difficulty of living at Rathfinnan upon reduced means than by her father's invincible repugnance to certain forms of economy—and she accepted the inevitable with scarcely a word of complaint.

“Only I'd be sorry to be one of the distressed Irish ladies who are reduced to asking for English charity,” she remarked. “It wouldn't be from a man who had just picked my pocket that I would care to beg for a shilling.”

She was a little inclined to be hard upon Englishmen; but we are all accustomed to a general unpopularity which we cannot feel conscious of having done anything to deserve. Moreover, we meet with a good deal of consolatory personal kindness at the hands of those who profess to detest us. Wilfrid, for instance, was assailed by loud and evidently sincere protests, both on Nora's part and on that of her father and her brothers, when, during dinner that evening, he announced his impending departure. He had been expected to stay at least another week, he was told, and his assertion that he would be wanted for a few days in Dublin previous to his return to London was received with open incredulity.

“As if I didn't know the use that a Lord Lieu-

tenant has for his household!" cried Mr. Power. "You'll be wanted when he goes to the Castle next winter, my boy, and not a day sooner! Be honest, and say you've had enough of us. I'm sure it's small wonder, if you have!"

Wilfrid refused to say anything so rude and so false; but he really thought that he had trespassed long enough upon the hospitality of his entertainers; so the next morning he left, faithfully promising, in answer to their kind entreaties, that he would return during the winter and help them to knock over the snipe. He carried away with him a very pleasant recollection of them all, which, it must be owned, grew a little dim in the course of the ensuing months. He was young and well provided with both money and friends; nothing could be more natural than that, amidst the multiplicity of amusements which awaited him in London and elsewhere, the episode of his visit to Kerry should lose distinctness of outline in his memory.

But what he did not forget was the general impression produced upon him by his brief sojourn in Ireland. The melancholy stagnation of Dublin, the apathy and despair of the doomed land-owners, the startling and apparently unmeaning tragedy of the Phoenix Park murders, the escape of the assassins, the outrages which neither constituted authorities nor Nationalist leaders seemed able to check—all these looked like symptoms of a malady which, if not mortal, could not be treated successfully by mere palliatives. Either surrender, involving the practical abandonment of the island, or the maintenance of the Queen's authority and the protection of her sub-

jects by methods which only madmen would attempt to resist—these were the two alternatives which Wilfrid saw, and, as a loyal subject, he could not but prefer the latter. His uncle, however, to whom he rather imprudently expressed his views, and who, besides being a supporter of the existing Ministry, had always been an advanced Liberal, frowned him down.

“You don’t know what you are talking about,” that old and experienced politician said. “If government were as simple an affair as you imagine, any fool could govern. The truth is that, in this case, and in almost all cases, justice and compromise are synonymous. The Crimes Bill and the Arrears Bill will both of them be passed shortly, and then neither side will be entitled to complain.”

The result of compromise not unfrequently is to arouse the complaints of both sides; but what use is there in making such a disagreeable remark as that to a pig-headed old gentleman who is capable of going straight home and altering his will for less? Wilfrid Elles, like the sensible young fellow that he was, restrained his tongue and retained his opinion. This last, he was modest enough to reflect, was not of supreme importance, nor were his official duties in Ireland of a character that required him to hold any political opinions at all.

It was not, indeed, until after the turn of the year that he was summoned to don the uniform with sky-blue facings which was the outward symbol of his purely ornamental and unpaid post. By that time the Lord Lieutenant had taken up his residence at Dublin Castle and had begun to discharge social ob-

ligations with a pomp and circumstance which demand the support of varied uniforms ; by that time also sundry events had occurred which rendered the wearer of Wilfrid's uniform eager to be upon the spot and to hear what was likely to happen next. The attack upon Judge Lawson and the stabbing of Mr. Field, foreman of a jury which had returned a verdict of guilty in an agrarian case, had led to numerous arrests, and it was rumored that among the prisoners now safely lodged in jail would be discovered the murderers of Lord Frederick Cavendish and Mr. Burke. Wilfrid's friend Douglas, who professed to have private sources of information, had no doubt of it.

“ You may take your oath,” said he, “ that the rope is round those beggars' necks. We've got them like rats in a trap, and we don't mean letting them go again. I only wish we could hang a few of their principals into the bargain !”

Meanwhile, the beauty and fashion and officialdom of Dublin were being duly entertained, almost every evening, in the state apartments at the Castle, a fine suite of rooms which, when lighted up and filled with well-dressed women and uniformed men, enabled a humble looker-on to forget the gloom and squalor that lay so close at hand.

It was no part of Wilfrid's functions to examine the lists of invited guests, nor was there sufficient likelihood of his recognizing any acquaintances among these to make it worth his while to scrutinize them closely ; so that he was quite taken by surprise when, on the conclusion of a big banquet, an elderly gentleman in the garb of a deputy-lieutenant walked

down from the other end of the long table to clap him on the shoulder and say :

“ Well, how about those snipe ? ”

The snipe, it appeared, had been exceptionally abundant that season, and Mr. Power was very sorry to hear that his young friend could not be spared from Dublin to assist in the extermination of such as still remained.

“ It would have been an act of charity,” he said, “ to come and lend Denis and me a hand—not to mention that your company would have cheered us up in our solitude.”

“ Miss Power has left you, then ? ”

“ She has,” answered Miss Power’s father, with a sigh ; “ she’s away in Paris, getting the coat of polish that she needs, and Jim is in India with his battery, and my house is left desolate. Maybe that’s just as well, though, for there’s no knowing what may happen any night. The devil fly away with that fellow Fitzpatrick ! I shouldn’t have let myself be talked over by him ; but I did, and a brace of policemen are seated in my hall, protecting Denis, at this moment. I’m here to pay my respects and make reports—to which nobody will give much attention. As I can’t be overheard, I may tell you that I don’t think our present rulers are making a much more successful job of it than their predecessors did. Not that you wouldn’t be as safe in Kerry as in London, if you would take compassion upon us ; but my personal safety is what I’d be sorry to back at even money.”

Wilfrid felt bound to take up the cudgels on behalf of the executive, which he really did not think

could be accused of lacking energy. Was not the Crimes Act working satisfactorily? Had not the police already laid hands upon the ringleaders of an atrocious conspiracy, which there was now every reason to hope would be stamped out? But Mr. Power shook his head sceptically.

“Those scoundrels may be committed for trial,” he answered, “but I doubt it. And I doubt still more whether any jury will be found in Ireland to convict them.”

Wilfrid observed that, in that case, the fault would scarcely lie with those who were working day and night to restore order to Ireland.

“Oh, it won't be their fault,” returned Mr. Power, impatiently. “Nothing is ever their fault—only everything! There's his Excellency getting up. Did you ever see a man look more bored and more resigned? Well, I'm free to confess that I've had a good dinner. Let us eat and drink, for to-morrow we may be potted from behind a hedge. Come, now, and we'll talk to the ladies.”

CHAPTER VI

THE DEFEATED INVINCIBLES

MR. POWER'S life was not, perhaps, in such immediate danger as he chose to represent. Like other compatriots of his, who were very far indeed from participating in his opinions, he was disposed to be "agin the government" upon principle and under all circumstances; possibly also he repented of certain promises which appeared to have been wrung from him by Mr. Fitzpatrick. However this may have been, he declared that the state of penury to which he had been reduced rendered his instant departure from a Dublin hotel imperative, and thus he was not present at those proceedings in the Kilmainham Court-house of which Wilfrid Elles was, during the days that followed, a deeply interested visitor.

Thanks to the official position he held, Wilfrid found no great difficulty about obtaining a place in the crowded court, and his first survey of the six-and-twenty prisoners who were charged with "conspiring to murder government officials and others" gave him a start; for one among their faces at once came back to his memory. It was that of Kavanagh, the driver of the outside car, whom he had seen conducting four jovial fellows into the Phoenix Park on the evening of Lord Spencer's entry. For no reason

that he could call to mind Wilfrid had noticed the man, and now felt sure of him—a cheery, pleasant-looking specimen enough of his class, who did not seem to be in any way alarmed by his present awkward predicament. Nor, for the matter of that, did his comrades display signs of nervousness. Continually whispering and laughing among themselves, and confident, to all appearance, in the inability of the Crown to establish a case against them, they had rather the air of amused spectators than of criminals who were in peril of the gallows. Wilfrid failed to recognize them; although he fancied that the dark-bearded man, somewhat superior in dress and general aspect to his neighbors, was rather like a person who, as he remembered, had passed him on foot shortly before the car had come in sight on that fateful occasion. He inquired the name of the prisoner in question, and was told that he was James Carey, a Councillor of the City Corporation, well known both as a Nationalist and as a devout son of the Church.

Notwithstanding the evidence of the informer Farrell, and revelations of the existence of an assassination society connected with the Fenian Brotherhood, and involving, as was surmised, certain prominent members of the Land League, proof of the prisoners' guilt did not at first seem to be in the possession of their accusers. Repeated remands produced no witnesses of importance until, on the 12th of February, the carman Kavanagh was placed upon the witness-table. From the moment that this accomplice turned Queen's evidence the doomed men in the dock must have known that their chance of escape was small indeed. Some of them were observed to turn livid;

a few muttered curses upon their betrayer ; all kept their eyes intently fixed on him. Yet he did not say quite as much as he might have said. He deposed, indeed, to having driven Brady, Kelly, Caffrey, and Delaney to the Park, and these were at once charged in set terms with having committed the murders, while Fitzharris, nicknamed "Skin-the-Goat," the driver of the four-wheeled cab ; James Carey, and others were indicted as accessories ; but the testimony wrung from the man, who was no doubt a reluctant witness, was not absolutely conclusive. Wilfrid, leaving the foul and heated atmosphere of the court-house in company with his friend Douglas, after the hearing had been once more adjourned, remarked :

"Those fellows are not sentenced to death yet."

"They will be," returned the other, calmly. "Did you never hear the saying that if you put one Irishman on a spit you'll always find three others ready to turn him ? You may depend upon it that we shall get all the information we want now. The only pity is that one or two scoundrels who richly deserve hanging will have to be let off."

Wilfrid made a grimace.

"I suppose there's no help for it," said he ; "but I must say I don't quite like that method of obtaining convictions. It seems—well, I don't exactly know how to express it—rather unsportsmanlike, somehow. Don't you hate to see a fox dug out ?"

But Douglas was less squeamish.

"Murderers have no rights," he declared. "You must catch them and kill them any way you can. Besides, you know very well that there are sometimes

good reasons for digging out foxes. Talking of that, are you going to hunt to-morrow?"

Wilfrid had had his horses sent over from England, and went out pretty regularly with the Meath, the Kildare, and the Ward Union. He could afford to be well mounted, and a few rattling falls, which he was too young and in too good condition to mind, enlightened both him and his animals as to the nature of a country which they had not at first understood. The hours which he thus spent were by far the pleasantest that fell to his lot at this time, for the Castle entertainments did not amuse him much, and closer acquaintance with Dublin had not dispelled the sense of oppressive melancholy which he had associated with the city from the outset.

However, it was neither hunting nor any other form of diversion that could have kept him away from the painfully exciting drama which was being enacted in the Kilmainham Court-house, and he was present, a week later, at what proved to be its practical conclusion; for the appearance of James Carey upon the witness-table was felt, both in the dock and elsewhere, to be final, even before the wretched man had opened his lips. Unnerved at starting—as well he might be by the storm of execration which broke from his betrayed associates at the sight of him—he soon recovered himself, and gave a full, lucid, and presumably truthful account of the affair in which he had played so prominent a part, as well as of the formation of the "Invincible" gang, with its objects and its instigators. He was listened to with breathless attention, with horror also, and disgust, for indeed it is not in human nature to pardon a traitor.

Yet when, in the course of his examination, he asked leave to quit the table for a few minutes, and, on doing so, had to pass close to the dock, a brief interchange of words between him and the prisoners seemed to justify Douglas's cynical comment upon the defection of Kavanagh. Brady, a big, powerful fellow, who was the actual murderer of Lord Frederick Cavendish and Mr. Burke, stretched out his hand and beckoned as if desirous of whispering to the witness, while one of the other men called out, "You perjured scoundrel!"

Carey started back, turning white. No doubt he was aware that if Brady had once got hold of him he would have had a very good chance of being throttled then and there. But, realizing that this would not be allowed to happen, he regained his self-possession.

"Ah!" he observed, coolly, "you were all trying to forestall me."

Very likely that was true; it has since been stated by those who ought to know that such was the case. But at the moment no man with a heart in him could help feeling rather ashamed that justice should have been driven to make terms with cowardly perfidy. Wilfrid left the court at the end of the day, saddened and dispirited. That murderers should be made to pay the penalty of their crime was right enough, and a matter for congratulation; but what was to be expected in the future of a race which demanded independence at the top of its voice, yet appeared to be destitute of all the qualities requisite even for local self-government?

"They are no good," he said to himself, in his

haste; "they never will be any good, unless when they are held down by somebody of whom they are afraid. So one comes back to buckshot, if not bullets, after all."

To a similar conclusion many Englishmen of far longer experience than Wilfrid Elles have been reduced—a conclusion repugnant to the Briton's innate love of liberty, but forced upon him partly by circumstances, partly by his utter inability to comprehend or sympathize with the Celt.

The closing scene of the examination before the magistrates, which resulted, as of course it could not but result, in the committal of the chief prisoners, was not witnessed by Wilfrid, who was summoned in haste to London the next day, owing to his uncle's serious illness. Sir John Elles, an old man who had for some time past been in failing health, knew very well that his days were numbered, and was anxious and troubled as to the fate of the wealth which he must shortly resign. During early life he had achieved great mercantile successes; of late years he had been, after a less conspicuous fashion, successful also in the political arena, into which he had descended as an ardent Radical. The riches which he had amassed had been of considerable service to his party, and had converted him into something of a personage—one of those mute personages whose existence the world is apt to ignore until, some fine morning, peerages are conferred upon them.

Sir John (perhaps because there was no immediate prospect of a change of Ministry or a general election) seemed not unlikely to die in the skin of a mere knight; yet his constitution was so good, and his

desire to live a little longer so strong, that the doctors hesitated to pronounce a decided opinion as to the termination of his present attack. At all events, when Wilfrid reached the large, expensively furnished, and rather dismal house in Rutland Gate which, since the death of Lady Elles some years before, had been opened to but few visitors, it did not strike him that his uncle looked much like a moribund.

“Oh, I am better,” said the tall, gaunt man with the white beard, whom he found extended upon a sofa, with a rug over his knees; “the chances are that I shall disappoint the undertaker this time. I am sorry that you should have been sent for unnecessarily, but I must take all the blame for that upon myself. If you don’t slip into my shoes to-morrow, you will very soon, and I should like to make sure that they don’t prove a misfit. Sit down, will you, and listen to me for five minutes or so.”

Wilfrid sat down submissively. He knew exactly what was coming, having already heard it all many a time; though Sir John’s impaired memory doubtless rendered him unconscious of self-repetition. The exordium, dealing with the responsibilities that attach to wealth and the duties of those who, without having earned it, find themselves suddenly in possession thereof, was familiar to the ears of Sir John’s heir-presumptive, as was also the expression of a hope that the young man would ere long strive to serve his country and the Liberal party by seeking a seat in Parliament. Meek acquiescence met the requirements of the case so far; but it was rather disconcerting to be abruptly asked:

“And what have you to say about Ireland now?”

Something rather less foolish than you said the last time you were here, I hope."

Wilfrid, being an honest creature, made the reply that honesty compelled him to make. He could see nothing for it but the firm and stern rule of the conqueror. Law-abiding citizens would have no tyranny to fear; the majority, who were not law-abiding in their conduct or their sympathies, must submit to such inconvenience as they had brought upon themselves. "We shall never make these people love us; we may make them understand that we mean to be their masters, and that we shall not be unjust masters, however unamiable they may think us."

The old Radical waved his hand impatiently. "God bless my soul! do you imagine that majorities can be trampled under foot in that way? No responsible statesman imagines anything of the sort, let me tell you. Punish malefactors as fiercely as you please—that is being done, and will be done—but don't take it into your head that executions are going to prevent the representatives of the Irish nation from demanding what they have a perfect right to demand, and will stop the whole business of the country until they get. You talk about justice; but what justice is there in making these men suffer for crimes which they have publicly denounced?"

Wilfrid ventured to object that recent disclosures had not tended to exonerate such representatives of the Irish nation as were also members of the Land and National Leagues. There was Sheridan, for instance.

"Well, well! There is Sheridan, and there is Frank Byrne, and I forget who else. What does

that prove? Suppose a man who belongs, as I do, to the Reform Club, reels down Pall Mall, drunk, and assaults the police: is the Committee of the Reform responsible? If you are a Tory, you had better say so at once—then I shall know what to think.”

With his shaggy gray eyebrows drawn together and the light of battle in his sunken eyes, he looked very much as though he would likewise know what to do, and as though his first act would be to disinherit the renegade.

“Believe me,” he went on, as his nephew remained silent, “Home Rule for Ireland has ceased, or will very soon cease, to be a party measure. Sooner or later, it is certain to be conceded, as all popular demands invariably are, and the Tories know that. The only question is whether the credit and the benefit of the concession are to belong to us or to them.”

Wilfrid was somewhat taken aback; for at that time the granting of Home Rule had not yet been contemplated as a possibility by either side. Not knowing quite how to answer, he merely observed that, of course, he was not a Tory.

“Then don’t talk like one,” returned his uncle, falling back upon the pillows from which he had raised himself. He proceeded to a long and rambling denunciation of his perfidious foes. In spite of what he had just said, it was evident that for him the Home-Rule question, like every other question, was simply and solely a party one, and that he cared little for the intrinsic merits or demerits of such a scheme.

“When you are returned to the House of Commons,” he wound up by declaring, “you will be neither more nor less than a private soldier in an

army, and, as such, your duty will be to obey your leaders, not to draw up plans of campaign on your own account. It stands to reason that government cannot be carried on under any other conditions. There are, to be sure, a few idiots who call themselves independent members; but it would go against my conscience to be instrumental in adding a single unit to their number. If you want to be an independent member, don't ask me to pay your election expenses, please."

He was assured that Wilfrid had no immediate ambition to be a member of any kind, and this appeared to tranquillize him.

"After all," he murmured, "there is no such great hurry. I may live another year, or even two years—who knows? Only I take it that when I die, and when you succeed to what I shall have to leave you, you will feel in honor bound to vote as I should have voted."

CHAPTER VII

DAMNOSA HEREDITAS

Two years constitute a large or a small slice out of a man's life according to the period of that life to which he may belong. It is much more a question of age than of actual events, and much less one of reality than of imagination. So it is not surprising that Wilfrid Elles, when he landed from a Cunard steamer at Liverpool in January, 1885, should have felt as if he had been in exile for an eternity, and that he was a totally different person from the Wilfrid Elles who had hastily quitted his native land in the summer of 1883. He was not, in truth, a very different person, nor—as will be noticed—had he been absent for quite the length of time above specified; but he said to himself that he had been two years away, which seemed like twenty, and he doubted his ability to pick up the dropped threads of an existence from which, during the interim, he had been so completely severed.

The truth—which he did not attempt to blink in his retrospective self-communings—was that he had simply turned tail and bolted after his uncle's very sudden death had made a rich and disagreeably responsible man of him. What he had been above all things conscious of on the occasion of that scarcely

foreseen crisis had been the obligation thereby laid upon him to enter public life, and an extreme reluctance to do so, no matter in how subordinate a capacity. It had seemed to him essential that he should have a respite, during which to make up his mind with regard to various rather important questions; and as certain friends of his had just then been upon the point of starting on an expedition to Northern India, he had gladly joined their party. The pursuit of big game, that traditional excuse for the absence and idleness of opulent youth, had subsequently lured him round the world, and had now, at the conclusion of that pleasant circuit, brought him back to England, in the wake of numerous skins and heads which had been consigned to Mr. Rowland Ward as outward and visible signs that he had not altogether wasted his time in the Rocky Mountains and elsewhere. The world, after all, is small, and all roads lead to Rome, and sooner or later a man must needs fulfil his appointed destiny.

It is seldom, however, that postponement of the plunge or the leap produces increased self-confidence. Wilfrid, during his expatriation, had of course read the newspapers as often as these had been obtainable, had been as much excited as the rest of his fellow-countrymen over the despatch of the expedition to Egypt to rescue General Gordon, had been mildly interested in the progress of measures for parliamentary reform, and had taken note of the tactics by means of which Irish members had rendered the maintenance of the Queen's authority over their constituents a hard matter. But the result of such desultory studies and intermittent cogitations had

been to leave him in complete uncertainty as to whether he was at heart a Liberal or a Conservative, whether honesty would compel him to support or oppose a Ministry which seemed to him to have made some rather bad mistakes, yet which might be more worthy of support than those who attacked it. And the worst of it was that he could not take up the easy and comfortable position of a disinterested looker-on. It was incumbent upon him, by his way of thinking, to take a side—even to take one side, not the other. Sir John's remark (which had proved to be a valedictory remark) that he ought to consider himself bound, on inheriting what he had inherited, to vote as his predecessor would have voted, possessed for him almost, if not altogether, the force of a condition. It was, to be sure, an unreasonable and inadmissible condition; still, he had not declined it, nor would he, in all probability, have been now at liberty to dispose as he pleased of the late Sir John's imposing fortune but for his silent acquiescence.

Now, no candid person will assert that it is disagreeable to be rich; but, on the other hand, everybody must admit that it is desirable to be at liberty. So Wilfrid, after swallowing the hook which he could not have declined, and darting away incontinently, like an enraged salmon, would fain have persuaded himself, had that been possible, that he did not now so much mind being landed upon the bank by patient, inexorable Destiny as he would have done on his first recognition of the fact that he had ceased to be a free agent. But these efforts on his part met with no brilliant success.

“Whether I like it or whether I don't, whether

I'm what I was or whether I'm not," he mused, ruefully, in the smoking-carriage of the express train which was hurrying him towards London, "nothing can be more obvious than that there isn't a chance of escape for me. Even if I were under no special obligation to respect Uncle John's wishes, I should be practically forced to do the things which I suppose he meant me to do. A bachelor, with a house in London and a house in the country, and no occupation of any sort or kind, is an absurdity. Parliament and matrimony stare him in the face; he becomes simply irrelevant when he pleads that politics bewilder him and that he doesn't want to marry anybody. Hang it all! I've a good mind to marry the cook. That would be something like a Radical proceeding to start with, and would help to convince me that my sentiments are sincerely democratic."

This little outbreak of temper was partly due to the circumstance that Wilfrid—like the "Sam" so spiritedly exhorted in the ballad to "cheer up"—was aware that many a girl whom correspondents of his knew well was waiting for him in the town. Exempt though he was, by the decrees of Providence and death, from the interference of near relatives, he was not absolutely devoid of connections and friends, who, it scarcely needs to be added, had kept a fond, if distant, eye upon him during his wanderings. They would have been neither human nor humane if they had not, each and all of them, been ready with a charming candidate for his well-filled hand. If they had no daughters of their own (and some, unfortunately, had), they took an amiable, unselfish interest, of which they made no secret, in other peo-

ple's daughters ; so the poor rich young man might well ejaculate that there was no chance of escape for him.

When he reached the great, empty house in Rutland Gate, where his late uncle's servants had been residing for such a long time in dignified leisure, and which looked so very unlike a possible home, he found numerous letters and cards of invitation awaiting him. People—a good many people, anyhow—were already in London, it appeared, and he said to himself, with a doleful grimace, that cub-hunting had begun. He at once wrote to accept such of the invitations as were not cancelled by others, taking them in alphabetical order, so as to be quite impartial, and, after disposing of a solitary dinner, over which the stolid scrutiny of a butler and a couple of footmen very nearly caused him to choke himself, went off to his club to spend the evening in comparative peace. There he fell in with several men of his acquaintance, to whom he narrated his adventures in foreign lands, and who, by way of return, imparted to him various more or less interesting items of domestic intelligence. Not having seen the evening papers, he did not know, until they mentioned it, that all London had been thrown into consternation that same day by dynamite explosions which had occurred almost simultaneously at the Tower and at Westminster Palace. By good fortune, no actual loss of life had ensued, although some unoffending persons had been injured ; but the Treasury bench in the House of Commons had been shattered, while a packet which had been left upon the steps leading to the crypt below Westminster Hall

would probably have wrecked the building but for the pluck of a police constable, whose suspicions were aroused by its appearance and who was able to carry it to a less confined spot before it exploded, stunning him and a comrade who had come to his aid. That these outrages were the work of disaffected Irishmen was taken for granted, and Wilfrid's informants sardonically hoped that he wasn't a Home Ruler now.

"I am not aware of having ever been one," he replied. "I don't even know what Home Rule means."

"Nor anybody else, either," somebody remarked; "but that doesn't prevent her Majesty's Ministers from doing their level best to make friends with the Home-Rule party. Luckily, they haven't succeeded, and won't succeed, in that particular aim; but they may be relied upon to lose no opportunity of bringing about the ruin of their country."

The speaker was, of course, a Conservative, as were those who sat near him, and as, indeed, were Wilfrid Elles's former intimates almost without exception. They were tolerably good-humored about it, but they evidently assumed that Sir John Elles's heir must have inherited his political opinions—which, according to them, were nothing short of treasonable.

"If this sort of thing doesn't open your eyes," one of them observed, "nothing will. Oh, I know what you are going to say: the Irish members aren't dynamiters. Well, that's as may be; but I'm open to lay you six to four in what you please that we don't hear any public denunciation of the use of dynamite from those gentlemen."

Wilfrid had not been going to enter any plea on behalf of the followers of Mr. Parnell, but he refrained from stating as much; nor did he defend himself against the charge of being, what at that time he assuredly was not, an advanced Liberal. He felt, nevertheless, that that was what he ought to be, and would probably have to be; so the best plan was to hold his tongue, pending further enlightenment, and to hope that advanced Liberalism might be found compatible with a determination to punish the seditious.

Further enlightenment, in the shape of certain speeches, addressed to the inhabitants of the County Clare by the leader of the Irish party, which contained no allusion whatsoever to dynamiters, was speedily forthcoming, and the result of the Tipperary election, which returned the treasurer of the National League to Parliament against the expressed determination of the electors, seemed to prove that that leader was strong enough to do exactly what he pleased; yet it remained doubtful whether the late Sir John Elles would, at such a juncture, have spoken for or against the Ministry of which he had been at least a nominal supporter, and Wilfrid, who found it difficult to bring his sympathies into line with his notions of their proper tendency, was additionally shaken by the disastrous news of the fall of Khar-toum and the death of General Gordon. What is an honest man to say or think when the inexorable testimony of facts goes against statesmen of whom he would fain be a humble follower?

For his fortune or his misfortune, there was a lady in London at that time who had a decisive answer

at his service. He met her first at a dinner-party, when he chanced to be seated on her right hand, and when, without waiting for a formal introduction, she was so kind as to enter into conversation with him. She was a charmingly pretty little lady, with a profusion of diamonds in her light-brown hair, fascinating dimples upon her cheeks, and an easy, confidential method of address which no male creature had ever yet been able to withstand. Her name—so a card, which had not yet been removed from the vicinity of her plate when she turned her head towards him, informed him—was Lady Virginia Lethbridge.

“You, at all events, Mr. Elles, are game, to stick to the ship, I should hope,” was her opening remark—and he gathered, from the gesture with which she interposed a huge fan of white ostrich feathers between herself and their host, that other people had not come up to her expectations in that respect. “Your uncle’s nephew can’t be anything but a stanch Radical.”

“I suppose he can’t,” Wilfrid agreed, with a sigh. “That is exactly where the shoe pinches.”

“Oh, but you are not to let it pinch! What is the matter? Egypt or Ireland?”

“Well, a little of both, perhaps,” the young man confessed. “I can’t approve, much as I should prefer to approve; and the consequence is that I rather wish I were back in the Rocky Mountains.”

“Ah, yes; you have been in the Rockies, haven’t you—and in all sorts of other outlandish places? You must tell me about it one of these days; it was so quaint and original of you to fly the country,

rather than make up your mind ! You have had to come back, though, and now you will have to play upon our side ; for really we can't afford to do without you. So many rats are deserting us !" she added, with a jerk of her elbow towards the gentleman whose champagne she proceeded to raise to her lips.

"Do you seriously mean to tell me that you are a Radical ?" Wilfrid inquired.

"Such is fame ! Of course I am a Radical, and if you knew anything at all you would know it. But I forgive you, in consideration of your having been such a long time away from everything and everybody. Why shouldn't I be a Radical, please ?"

"I thought you didn't look very much like one, that was all."

Lady Virginia laughed. She had an unimpaired supply of white and even teeth, so that laughter was highly becoming to her.

"Whatever I may look like," she rejoined, "that is what I am. Oh, I grant you that this Soudan affair has gone badly. It would have gone no better under a Conservative government ; still, the other side must be allowed to score one there, if they choose, and if they can. But Radicalism doesn't mean foreign policy, you know."

"What, precisely, does it mean ?" Wilfrid ventured to ask.

She was willing to tell him ; and a certain flavor of piquancy was conferred by the fastidious refinement of her features and costume upon a profession of faith which had no special novelty to recommend it. Wilfrid listened to her with some amusement, and with such measure of gratification as everybody

must derive from being singled out as a species of confidant by a remarkably pretty woman.

“I believe I am of your way of thinking,” he said, at last, when she paused for a moment to help herself from a dish which was being handed to her. “Generalities always sound all right; it is when one comes down to particular cases that one begins to scratch one’s head. There is the question of Ireland, you see.”

“Naturally!—and that is *the* question just now, isn’t it? Well, you were in Dublin when the murders were committed, which, I dare say, gave you a nasty jar; afterwards you heard the evidence at the trial of the murderers, and since then you have been in the United States, where you wouldn’t be likely to meet with any friends of Ireland. But do you think you really know anything about the rights and wrongs of this interminable quarrel?”

“Not quite as much as you seem to know about me,” answered Wilfrid, smiling. “I should be better informed by this time, no doubt, if everybody of whom I have made inquiries hadn’t charged me with utter ignorance, by way of reply, and hastened to change the subject. That sort of reception ends by becoming discouraging.”

“You shall have an encouraging and instructive reception when you come to see me in Tilney Street some afternoon,” Lady Virginia promised. “I’ll put you through a course of reading which will open your eyes—besides using my personal powers of eloquence upon you.”

“I should think they might be very persuasive,” Wilfrid remarked.

She threw a quick, demure side-glance at him, while a smile accentuated the dimple upon her smooth cheek.

“They shall be employed anyhow,” said she; “you are much too valuable and important to be allowed to stray into the enemy’s camp.”

Then she turned away to resume friendly relations with her entertainer, and Wilfrid had no further speech with her until the end of the evening, when she mentioned that she was always at home on Sunday afternoons.

“Why not come and lunch next Sunday, about two o’clock? That would give me time to read you a first lesson—a political one, I mean, not a Scriptural one—before the crowd comes tumbling in.”

CHAPTER VIII

LADY VIRGINIA

EXACTLY as the clocks struck two on the ensuing Sunday Wilfrid Elles was ushered into one of the prettiest drawing-rooms in London. He was given plenty of time for a leisurely survey of the exquisite and expensive *bibelots* with which it was a little overcrowded; for not until twenty minutes later did Lady Virginia, becomingly attired in a costume of some soft blue-gray material, make her appearance.

“How nice of you to remember your engagement!” she exclaimed, holding out her hand to him.

“I was not likely to forget it,” answered Wilfrid; “but I was beginning to be afraid that it had escaped your recollection.”

“Why? Am I behind time? And are you hungry? Let us go and eat, then. I don’t know what has become of Tom; but most likely we shall find him in the dining-room.”

It was in the spacious dining-room that Lady Virginia’s husband was discovered, plaeidly recruiting exhausted nature all by himself. He was a tall, rather good-looking man, no longer young, whom Wilfrid had noticed, but had not identified, at the dinner-party mentioned in the last chapter, and it

was easy to guess, from the fashion in which he greeted his wife and her guest, that he was not altogether master in his own house. He shook Wilfrid by the hand, begged him to take care of himself, resumed his seat, and inquired whether anybody else was going to turn up.

“It doesn't look as if anybody else was,” answered Lady Virginia. “No; now that I come to think of it, I gave everybody else a pressing invitation to stay away, because Mr. Elles and I are going to confabulate upon affairs of state presently. What have you done with Laura?”

“Dropped her in Park Lane half an hour ago,” Mr. Lethbridge replied. “Lunching, by request—your request, I understand—with I forget what friends of yours. That's why I asked who else was due. I thought perhaps we should have a few ticket-of-leave men bouncing in before we reached the coffee.”

“Tom,” Lady Virginia serenely remarked, “is a malignant Tory. He doesn't appreciate the society of the released political prisoners whom I am proud to call my friends, and if there were any generosity in him—but there's no more than can be expected of the party to which he belongs—he would acknowledge that nobody requires him to appreciate it. He has been quite unnecessarily bolting his food and laying up indigestion for himself out of fear of being called upon to be civil to some Irish M.P.'s. As if I shouldn't have had discretion enough to make sure of his absence before asking a solitary patriot to break bread in this house!”

“I suppose,” agreed Mr. Lethbridge, “that you

would. I beg your pardon. Very glad to hear that Mr. Elles isn't a patriot."

After that the conversation turned upon social topics, of which Wilfrid, owing to his prolonged absence from England, was as ignorant as he had owned himself to be with regard to the Irish difficulty; but when Lady Virginia had left the room—after saying, "Come up-stairs in ten minutes or a quarter of an hour, Mr. Elles, and be lectured, please"—her husband, lighting a cigarette, remarked:

"I wouldn't, if I were you, you know—I wouldn't, really. Not that there's much chance of your consenting to be advised by me. All the same, if you mean to go in for politics, as I presume you do, you might as well avoid committing yourself to an extreme line before you start."

"You are not in Parliament yourself?" said Wilfrid, interrogatively.

"God forbid! I was in the House at one time for a couple of years. Then my wife did me the inestimable service of canvassing the constituency on behalf of my opponent, and I was kicked out by a triumphant majority. Never again, thank you! However, as I was saying, or going to say, it's all very fine for Virginia to play the fool; that is capital fun for her and doesn't injure anybody in particular. But whether you can afford to proclaim yourself a Republican or a Home Ruler, or something equally ridiculous, before you have even secured a seat, is another question."

"I don't think I am likely to do that," said Wilfrid. Mr. Lethbridge shook his head.

"I should be sorry to answer for you, and your

wisest course would be to hook it out of this house without more ado. Don't tell Virginia that I said so, though; she would be apt to impute unworthy motives to me. In reality, I am quite disinterested and my motives are pure. But, of course, you won't take my advice."

Such advice could scarcely be acted upon, nor did Mr. Lethbridge insist. He only added, after a short pause :

"Don't think me inhospitable; I'm charmed to see you here. Only I always feel it my duty to address a word of warning to Virginia's prospective victims. That silences the voice of conscience, you see, and has no other effect, good, bad, or indifferent."

It certainly had not the effect of deterring Wilfrid from obedience to Lady Virginia's behest, and when he joined her by the fireside, where she was waiting for him, with a little pile of volumes upon her knees, she wasted no time over introductory remarks.

"Primary education!" she said, holding up the books, one by one, for his inspection. "You must begin by carefully perusing these works upon the history of Ireland. As you see, they are none of them very long—and they are quite conclusive."

Wilfrid, after examining their titles, observed that they were, perhaps, not wholly impartial.

"They are written from the Home-Rule point of view, you mean? Yes; but that's inevitable. Once realize the facts, and you will see that no other point of view is possible. You probably don't understand in the least that from the days of Queen Elizabeth we have been treating these people with almost incredible cruelty, and that if we have failed to exterminate

them, it hasn't been for want of trying. The mere fact that they were not exterminated by the Penal Laws proves their right to call themselves a distinct nation."

"But the Penal Laws," Wilfrid objected, "were abolished long ago."

"Not so long ago but that they are well remembered. Then there was the Act of Union—passed by sheer bribery and corruption against the will of the vast majority of the people. But, after all, the strongest argument, the unanswerable argument, against our present method of trying to govern Ireland is that at the close of a century it has utterly failed. You will admit, at least, that it has failed."

"So far," Wilfrid had to acknowledge, "it does not seem to have justified itself by success. Still we are moving along, and of late years we have made every concession, it appears to me, that the electors of the United Kingdom would allow us to make. When one considers how we have been met—"

"Oh," interrupted Lady Virginia. "I see you coming with your agrarian outrages and your boycotting, and all the rest of it! Such things are very deplorable, of course; but I don't see that you have much more right to complain of them than you would have to blame a horse for lashing out after you had tied him up by the head and were proceeding to belabor him with a thick stick. Oppressed nationalities must use such weapons as they find ready to their hands. We used to sympathize with Neapolitan and Venetian conspirators; we still sympathize with Poles. Why shouldn't sauce for the foreign goose be sauce for the British gander?"

“Well, if you really think that the cases are in any way parallel—”

“I really do ; and so will you when it dawns upon you that the Irish problem isn't simply and solely a landlord and tenant problem. I am perfectly sincere, and I go the whole hog. I go a good deal further, for instance, than the most advanced members of the Ministry ; though, of course, I am one of their backers.”

It was impossible to doubt either her sincerity or her enthusiasm.

The harangue upon which she embarked, and which it is needless to report verbatim (for, indeed, harangues of a kindred nature have become only too familiar to the ears of all of us since those days), was attractive by reason of the generous sentiments which it expressed, as well as by its audacity ; added to which, Lady Virginia's personal attractions were enhanced by a slightly heightened color. Wilfrid was not a little impressed ; for here, at all events, was somebody who knew clearly what she meant to advocate, and was not afraid of stating her aims in unequivocal language. He only ventured to remark, when she paused, that no English Government ever would or could grant independence to Ireland.

“Don't you be too sure of that,” she returned. “Separation, of course, won't be granted—besides, it isn't asked for. But legislative independence is exactly what will be granted before long by one side or the other ; and it would be too absurd to let the other side play our winning stroke after turning us out of the game !”

“Ah,” said Wilfrid, laughing, “I'm afraid, after

all, you are only a politician, like my poor old uncle, whose last words to me were a prophecy that if we didn't break up the Empire, the Tories would. It's a mere game of beggar-my-neighbor, then?"

Lady Virginia surveyed him reproachfully, with her head a little on one side.

"So young and yet so—so cheeky!" she murmured. "No. Mr. Elles, it isn't a mere game of beggar-my-neighbor, and I am very serious about it. But, of course, one wants the right party to do the right thing; and ours is the right party."

"I envy you your good fortune in feeling so confident of that!"

"You will share it; it is indispensable that you should share it. And if you have anything like a well-balanced mind, conviction will be brought home to you before long. You must expect to be a little bit bored in the process; every blessing has its price. But those books won't bore you; they will make you burn with mingled indignation and shame."

"Will they make me emulate you by going the whole hog?" asked Wilfrid.

"Perhaps not; but that isn't necessary. For the present I am only trying to insert the thin end of the wedge."

"And when you have achieved that?"

"Oh, then, I flatter myself that I shall be able to prize you up to any height that may afterwards be required. I have the modesty and candor that belong to true greatness, you will observe."

Wilfrid's rejoinder was checked by the entrance of a visitor who was announced as Sir Samuel Bland, and whom he already knew by reputation, though not by

sight. This celebrated and exceedingly wealthy representative of a northern constituency was a plump, sleek little man of fifty or thereabouts, with a smooth-shaven countenance, small, twinkling eyes, and an ingratiating smile. Extending his fat, white hand, he trotted up to Lady Virginia, who said :

“ I am in the act of converting a weak brother—Mr. Elles, a nephew of Sir John, whom you used to admire and respect so much. Sit down and help me to persuade him that there is no salvation out of the Radical fold.”

Sir Samuel simpered amiably.

“ My dear lady,” he replied, “ you could persuade anybody of anything. Who am I that I should attempt to gild refined gold ?”

And in truth he did not seem to feel any overwhelming interest in the political aberrations of a young man who may, at the moment, have been a little in his way. Eminent chiefly by his philanthropy and, to a somewhat less extent, in virtue of his gift for platform oratory, Sir Samuel Bland was highly favored by certain great ladies, of whose charms and social position he was—so rumor asserted—rather more appreciative than an elderly gentleman of his incorruptible Radical principles ought to have been. He gave utterance to a few vague commonplaces, repeated very much what Lady Virginia had said upon a previous occasion about the impossibility of Sir John Elles’s nephew proving a renegade, and then looked as if he rather wished that Sir John Elles’s nephew would go away.

However, he would have been none the better off if his wishes had been complied with ; for the room

now began to fill rapidly, and it was evident that for some time to come Lady Virginia would be unable to devote her exclusive attention either to him or to any other visitor. Perceiving this, Wilfrid soon picked up his armful of books and rose to depart.

“Mark, learn, and come back if there is any difficulty about digestion,” said Lady Virginia. “Come back anyhow; for your education will need finishing. Also I wanted to have introduced you to my sister Laura, who ought to have been in by this time, but who doesn’t seem to be coming. Laura, I may tell you, is one of the prettiest girls in London. Now I am sure we shall see you again before we are much older.”

CHAPTER IX

THE TILNEY STREET SISTERS

LADY VIRGINIA might have chosen her parting words more judiciously if she were really anxious to welcome her protégé in Tilney Street again at an early date. That harassed young man, whose present habitation was ridiculously unsuited to a bachelor, and who was painfully conscious of the impossibility of holding it against feminine invasion for an indefinite length of time, was far from being attracted by her ladyship's announcement that she had a sister who was one of the prettiest girls in London. There were so many prettiest girls in London!—whereas there was, so far as he was aware, but one Lady Virginia Lethbridge. Why must she needs proclaim that she was blessed or cursed with a sister, and thus rob a modest stranger of certain flattering unctions which he had been laying to his innocent soul?

Consequently, Wilfrid took his time over the perusal of those books. As a matter of fact, they demanded rather careful perusal, accompanied by meditation and verification of some of the statements which they contained. They did not invariably stand the latter test; they were avowedly one-sided, and they were composed, for the most part, in an impassioned style ill adapted to enlist the sympathy of

Anglo-Saxon readers. Yet when all deductions had been made and every exaggeration allowed for, it remained undeniable that the advocates of Home Rule (or, at least, of self-government in some shape or form) had a strongish *prima facie* case. That much, Wilfrid thought, might be conceded without prejudice, and with as many "neverthelesses" and "notwithstandinges" as further research and rumination might justify. The wrongs of Ireland in the past had been more cruel and less excusable than he had supposed, while the mere fact that, in the present, an immense majority of the Irish people declared, through their representatives, their dissatisfaction with the existing method of government must be accepted as entitling them to something different. Not, perhaps, to what they demanded, but at all events to some measure which might possibly content them and inflict no intolerable injury upon others.

For the rest, Home Rule was not at that particular moment the burning question, nor had any responsible English statesman as yet associated himself with an exceedingly troublesome band of politicians. The Ministry, confronted, immediately after the re-assembling of Parliament, with votes of censure upon their Egyptian policy in both Houses, had other fish to fry, and indeed only escaped overthrow by a narrow majority in the Commons, while they were, as a matter of course, defeated in the Lords. The incident of the Russian advance upon Penjdeh and the consequent public excitement did not tend to render their position more enviable; so that the resignation of some members of the Cabinet, if not of all, was

rumored to be imminent. In any case, an administration which must, in the nature of things, be so near the end of its tether, was unlikely to attempt any fresh departure so far as Ireland was concerned; and although it was as yet uncertain whether the Crimes Act was to be renewed or not, nobody expected that it would be allowed to lapse.

“All the same,” said Lady Virginia, “Ireland is the one thing that signifies. The Irish members (by the way, won’t you come and meet some of them at dinner?—they are quite tidy, I assure you, in spite of what you may have been told) can almost do what they please already, and in the next Parliament there are sure to be more of them. So nobody will be able to do without them. Added to which theirs is a righteous cause. You acknowledge now that it’s a righteous cause, don’t you? I was sure you would.”

It was in Hyde Park, one mild February afternoon, that her ladyship thus addressed a wayfarer to whom she had beckoned, telling her coachman to draw up beside the railings. Wilfrid, in reply, did not think that he was prepared to go quite so far as that.

“I am willing,” said he, “to acknowledge that there is nothing surprising in the fact that a good many Irishmen wish for Home Rule, and I’ll denounce the policy of the last century as loudly as you please; but—”

“Oh, bother the last century!” interrupted Lady Virginia; “it’s the policy of the present century, beginning with the Act of Union, that wants denunciation. I perceive, as St. Paul—or was it St. Peter?—said to somebody who didn’t agree with him, that you are ‘still in the gall of bitterness and bond of

iniquity.' You had better come home to tea with me and be washed clean of your lingering tenderness for Irish landlords. Jump in," she added, lifting up a corner of the bearskin rug which covered her knees ; "it's very nice of me to ask you, considering that you haven't had the common civility to leave a card at my door all this time."

So he jumped in, and was whirled away towards complete surrender under conditions which made that surrender easy and pleasant enough. For Lady Virginia, besides being so pretty and so vivacious, was really quite convincing. What, she put it to him, as a reasonable and intelligent being, was the sense of making two bites at a cherry? When once you had admitted the justice and necessity of a great reform you only stultified yourself and pleased nobody by advocating mere snippets of it. The union between Great Britain and Ireland had proved an unsuccessful experiment. Very well; then let it be frankly abandoned, and if somebody must needs suffer pecuniary loss, why should it not be the landlords?—who, for that matter, had only themselves to thank.

"It isn't as if they had ever done their duty, or even tried to do it."

Possibly she would have been less convincing if she had been less pretty; but she appeared, at any rate, to be both enthusiastic and sincere, and, of course, it is perfectly true that no great reform can be carried without detriment to certain members of the community. Wilfrid, taking into consideration the liberty which attaches to irresponsibility and insignificance, was almost, if not altogether, disposed to declare himself a Home Ruler then and there.

Darkness was falling, and shaded lamps had been carried into the warm, luxurious Tilney Street drawing-room by the time that he was conducted thither. As he entered, in the wake of his conductress, a tall young woman started up from the deep easy-chair in which she was reclining by the fireside, and announced, addressing nobody in particular, that she had been asleep. This was Lady Laura Mayne, an auburn-haired, violet-eyed girl, whose loveliness deserved, beyond all question, the praise bestowed upon it by the elder sister, to whom she bore no sort of resemblance. Wilfrid's first impression of her was that she looked as stupid as she was beautiful; but then, to be sure, she was, by her own confession, only half-awake.

"Are you going to talk politics?" she asked, after Lady Virginia had introduced Wilfrid, with brief explanatory remarks, and had begun to pour out tea. "Don't mind me, if you are; I can drop off again with the utmost ease in a minute."

"But we aren't," her sister replied: "there's no immediate occasion for it. Mr. Elles, I am glad to tell you, is converted, and it only remains for him to discover some right-minded constituency. Meanwhile, I wish you would entertain him for ten minutes or so; I must go and scribble half a dozen notes to catch the post."

She hastily swallowed a cup of tea and left the room, throwing over her shoulder, on the threshold, a backward glance which struck Wilfrid as expressive of mischievous amusement. Was it of malice prepense, then, that she had picked him up on her passage through the Park, and had tossed him, so to

speaking, at the feet of a *débutante* whom she was doubtless solicitous of establishing?

Such a suspicion was neither unpardonable nor unnatural; but he had not been many minutes in Lady Laura's company before he came to the conclusion that it was probably unfounded. For, indeed, the girl did not exert herself in the slightest degree for his amusement, nor was he, after all, so prodigious a prize that an Earl's daughter of striking beauty need be assumed to have designs upon him. Lady Laura responded to the conversational efforts which he felt bound to make after a placid, monosyllabic fashion which ended by provoking him a little. Every now and then she yawned unrestrainedly. He mentally accused her of "putting on side," and would fain have conveyed a hint to her, had that been practicable, that he was at least as much bored as she could be.

"You are not particularly interested in politics, I suppose," said he, at length, after racking his brains in vain to hit upon any subject that did interest her.

She shook her head drowsily. "Not in the least. In fact, I think I rather hate them. But perhaps that isn't their fault, poor things!"

"Whose fault?" asked Wilfrid, puzzled.

"The fault of the politics. It's the politicians who are so deadly dull! I wonder why Virginia persists in surrounding herself with them."

Wilfrid could not say, but suggested that it might be because she did not think them dull.

"Oh, she must! Didn't you meet a lot of them that Sunday when you lunched here?"

"I met Sir Samuel Bland," Wilfrid answered.

“Well, he is typical. He used to have a hideous wife, I remember; but she died last year. Now he has a plain-headed daughter, who is sure to make him happy by marrying well, as she will succeed to an enormous fortune. He is—”

But apparently Lady Laura could not face the exertion of defining what he was; for her voice died away in a prolonged yawn. Presently, as Wilfrid remained silent, she remarked:

“They are all of them either like that or like you. Most of them are like that.”

In what respect he differed from Sir Samuel Bland and other politicians Wilfrid was not on that occasion destined to learn. Lady Virginia reappeared before he had time to institute inquiries, and immediately afterwards Lady Laura rose with great deliberation, stretched herself, and slowly left the room.

“Well,” said the elder sister, as soon as the door had closed, “didn’t I tell you so?”

“Really,” answered Wilfrid, with a touch of irritation, “I can’t remember that you did. You spoke, I believe, of exceptional beauty—which I don’t dispute.”

“What more would you have? I am afraid you have been a little bit spoiled, Mr. Elles, and if Laura has snubbed you—as of course she has, because she snubs everybody—that will do you no great harm.”

“It hasn’t done me an atom of harm,” Wilfrid declared; “it hasn’t even put me out of conceit with myself—though that may have been your sister’s kindly intention. I knew perfectly well, before she took so much trouble to make it clear to me, that I

was quite unworthy of her notice. Whatever I may be, nobody can call me ambitious."

Lady Virginia laughed delightedly.

"Oh, how cross we are!" she exclaimed. "Never mind! You sha'n't be teased any more to-day. If you aren't ambitious, I don't mind telling you that you ought to be, and now that you are committed to our side, I shall make it my business to further your legitimate aspirations. Are you game to fight an uncertain seat before the general election? In case one should fall vacant, it might be worth your while and your money to do that, even if you should be beaten."

He was not aware of having formally committed himself to any side, nor was he at all eager to rush into the arms of expectant destiny; but he liked very well to sit by the fireside and listen to Lady Virginia's predictions of the triumph that awaited the great Liberal party, to the extreme advanced guard of which she prided herself upon belonging.

She might be talking rather nonsensically; the Liberal party might be, and probably was, far from any intention of embarking upon the sort of general crusade she advocated; but that did not prevent her from being fascinating, as well as amusing, nor was it altogether disagreeable to be likened to a crusader. According to Lady Virginia he was a man of that stamp (though he never would have supposed it), and she counted upon him to aid her and others in levelling the antiquated barriers which still divided the classes from the masses. Anything more grotesque and incongruous than the profession of such opinions by such a person it would have been diffi-

cult to imagine, and her auditor encouraged her by acquiescent nods every now and then, just for the amusement of seeing how far she would go.

She went a good long way. Absolute, universal equality, it seemed, was her ideal, and she did not shrink from declaring that this equality ought to apply to the distribution of wealth just as much as to political privileges. It was absurd to assert that A. had any right to an annual income of half a million while B. was starving in the next street; it was even doubtful whether A. had a right to more than a mere pittance—a thousand a year or something equally farcical—and there was no doubt at all that lazy plutocrats ought to be made to disgorge what they had never earned.

“I am afraid that means me,” observed Wilfrid. “It must, of course, mean Sir Samuel Bland. Are you prepared to give us a lead by voluntarily resigning nine-tenths of your income?”

“I would in a moment,” Lady Virginia unflinchingly averred, “if I ever had such a thing as a balance to dispose of. Unfortunately, my account is always overdrawn, and nothing can be hoped for from Tom, who is an unregenerate Tory.”

“So that you can enjoy the luxury of being a Socialist or a Communist upon tolerably easy terms.”

“If you are going to begin sneering,” returned Lady Virginia, with dignity, “you had better take yourself off. Anybody can sneer; and everybody knows that a high ideal can’t be realized from one moment to another. Take the Sermon on the Mount, for instance. I don’t suppose the Archbishop of Canterbury or anybody else would expect us to carry

out that programme to-morrow. However, you are sound about Ireland, which is the main thing just at present, and I have every reason to hope and believe that, when once you are in Parliament, you will stick to the strait and narrow way which leads to the Treasury Bench."

Wilfrid could see no warrant for such an anticipation; but he cautiously and submissively professed himself willing to follow his leader.

"Then," said Lady Virginia, "you will be an avowed Home Ruler, depend upon it, before this time next year. Oh, I am not talking at random; I know which way your leader's nose is turned. And if I were you, I should gain a harmless little triumph for myself by getting a yard or two in front of him."

CHAPTER X

AN EASTER HOLIDAY

LADY VIRGINIA'S confident prediction—destined though it was to be fulfilled—was not very seriously accepted by her disciple. Wilfrid was her disciple first and foremost, because she charmed him (which, to be sure, was a reason like another); but he did not imagine that practical statesmen contemplated any concessions to the Irish Nationalist party, nor was he at all sure that such concessions could be safely made. Meanwhile, persons who were neither statesmen nor under any particular obligation to be practical might very well be permitted to indulge in harmless, pleasing visions of Utopia. So, during those early spring days, he occasionally horrified his friends by utterances which they did not hesitate to stigmatize as downright seditious.

Of Lady Virginia he saw as much as her exceedingly numerous engagements would permit, and he became better acquainted with her sister, who, he was fain to admit, improved a little on acquaintance.

The girl, he soon perceived, did not really mean to be rude; she only did not care to be at the pains of being polite; and if this attitude of hers was somewhat unflattering and disconcerting, it was in a great measure atoned for by its impartiality. Smart young

men, whom she ruthlessly snubbed, turned away from her in rosy indignation, notwithstanding her beauty, and thus it came to pass that she was not unfrequently left in the company of a young man who had no pretensions to be smart. She liked Wilfrid, it appeared, a good deal better than she liked most people. So, at least, her sister found an opportunity of telling him, and he received this gratifying information with a bow and a deep sigh.

“Why do you make that snorting noise?” Lady Virginia inquired.

“It was meant to signify mild expostulation,” he replied. “If there happened to be a person by whom you were particularly anxious to be liked, and who had ceased to take much notice of you, I dare say you wouldn’t be greatly consoled at hearing from him or her that somebody else thought you comparatively unobjectionable. The truth, I am afraid, is that I allowed myself to be talked over far too easily. I no longer interest you, now that I have been securely penned in the Radical fold with the other black sheep.”

Lady Virginia was not displeased; discreet flattery never came amiss to her. But she told Wilfrid that the blackest thing about him was his ingratitude.

“What more can one do than keep on asking you to dinner? And then you don’t always come!”

“I should have thought,” said Wilfrid, that when I did come you might sometimes allow me to sit within shouting distance of you.”

“So I will as soon as ever you make yourself useful enough or useless enough to command the offer of a peerage. *En attendant*, I really can’t, Radical as I

am, throw the laws of precedence to the winds ; nobody would ever dine with me again if I did, and then Tom would turn rusty. However, you may sit beside me now and talk to me for the next half hour if you like."

It was at a large party in a very large house that the above colloquy took place, and as the house in question contained several sequestered nooks, well adapted for purposes of quiet conversation, Lady Virginia was enabled to be even better than her word. Her husband, indeed, had considerable difficulty in discovering her at an early hour of the morning, and after (according to his slightly exaggerated statement) everybody else had gone away.

"What," he inquired, as they drove homeward, "do you mean to do with that unhappy young man?"

"To make him happier, for one thing," was her ladyship's prompt reply.

"How?—by marrying him to Laura?"

"Well, one never knows. Laura makes herself so impossible!—and really she might do a great deal worse. He must be as rich as Cræsus, besides having literally *no* extravagant tastes. Meanwhile, I am endeavoring to keep his spirits up with political instruction. He has strong Conservative leanings, poor fellow ; and Conservatives, as you know, are always pessimists."

"You are an unprincipled woman, Virginia," observed Mr. Lethbridge.

"Who but you would say such a thing as that of me ! I don't suppose there is a woman in England who is so true to her principles as I am."

"Yes ; but your principles are so shockingly un-

principled. Moreover, my dear, you are too clever by half ; you make no allowance for an independent man's natural disinclination to do as he is told. I'll lay you two to one in what you like that Elles ends by slipping through your fingers."

"Done with you," returned Lady Virginia, instantly. "We'll make it monkeys, please."

This was not so pleasant for Mr. Lethbridge, who perceived that he was in danger of losing one thousand pounds, while his chances of winning five hundred pounds, in addition to the moral triumph which he anticipated, were small indeed. It seemed, however, as if he might yet prove to be a true prophet ; for Wilfrid, not long afterwards, suddenly left London for some destination unknown to his friends.

The cause of this abrupt departure was nothing more nor less than an unexpected encounter in Piccadilly one morning with a gentleman whose existence it must be confessed that he had wellnigh forgotten. Perhaps he would not have recognized Mr. Power if Mr. Power had not at once recognized him ; but he was really glad to see the kind old fellow again, and really interested in listening to the domestic annals which were subsequently imparted to him. Nora was at home—educated, finished, fit to hold her own with anybody in several modern languages ; Jim was away in India ; poor Denis had been packed off to a Colorado ranch, in default of any other opening for him.

"You'd find us even duller than you left us at the Abbey, if I could persuade you to run across for an Easter holiday. You wouldn't be persuaded, I suppose ? You're too great a man in these days to be free, or to condescend so far."

But Wilfrid, as it happened, had no engagements that could not be cancelled, and, Mr. Power's invitation being repeated in a somewhat more pressing and definite shape after dinner in Rutland Gate on the morrow, he gratefully accepted it. It behooved him (so he told himself) to seize any occasion that might offer of gaining some insight into the actual condition of affairs in Ireland; he had been long enough in London to experience a craving for fresh air; possibly, too, he was not altogether averse from asserting his liberty to Lady Virginia, who had given him to understand that he might be wanted to join in a brief excursion to Paris, "in case one of our party, who is a doubtful starter, should fail us at the last moment." Filling up an empty place is all very well when one is asked to do so as a favor: it is another thing to be instructed to hold one's self in readiness upon the chance of a place falling vacant.

Thus it came about that our friend Flurry, waiting at the railway station one afternoon to receive "the master," who had been over to England on business, was made to grin from ear to ear by the appearance, in Mr. Power's company, of a gentleman whose liberal tip on a previous occasion he had not yet forgotten.

"It's Miss Nora will be glad to see your honor, sorr," he announced, confidentially, while Mr. Power was engaged in conversation with the station-master. "She's leading a lonesome life now the young gentlemen are away—bad luck to thim as drives all the ould families out from the country!"

Wilfrid said something about its being pleasant to be welcomed. He hoped, indeed, that a welcome awaited him; although, on the road towards Rath-

finnan, his careless host mentioned casually that no instructions, telegraphic or other, had been issued to prepare a room for his reception.

“We’ve empty rooms enough, Heaven knows!” Mr. Power remarked, with a shrug of his shoulders.

But was it really Nora Power who, on their arrival, came out into the hall and shook hands with her father’s unexpected guest? Was this very beautiful, very self-possessed, and very neatly attired young lady the same girl who had taken a header into the sea two years ago to rescue a drowning urchin? Gone was the easy, swinging, somewhat clumsy gait that Wilfrid remembered—gone was the pig-tail of lingering childhood, gone, too, beyond recall, was the brogue which had erstwhile been one of Miss Nora’s charms. If she was glad to see him—as she amiably declared that she was—her gladness seemed to be of a conventional order, and he fancied that he could detect beneath it some suspicion of the annoyance which every mistress of a household must feel at having a visitor sprung upon her when neither fish nor entrées have been ordered for dinner.

Her manners, however, were perfect. His room was soon made ready for him; she did not apologize for the very simple repast to which they presently sat down, and during its progress she discoursed upon all manner of subjects with a well-bred fluency which really ought not to have disappointed him as much as it did. Not until Mr. Power had fallen sound asleep in the smoking-room did he take courage to remark, in a slightly aggrieved tone:

“I wish people wouldn’t grow up! I don’t recog-

nize you, Miss Power; and it is a most depressing experience to be unable to recognize former friends."

"But I recognize you," she returned, laughing. "Which is exhilarating—besides being quite as it should be. There wasn't any necessity for you to change; whereas it was indispensable for me to improve, and I hope you mean that I have improved."

"I made so bold as to be very well satisfied with you as you were," Wilfrid said.

"Ah, but the general public would never have tolerated me, as I used to be—thanks, all the same, for the compliment. After the course of drilling that I have been through I don't feel much afraid of the general public now, and I am less ignorant, as well as less prejudiced, than I was. Except, perhaps, in one particular."

"In what particular?"

"You mustn't be angry with me for saying that I still detest the English as much as ever. I make you welcome to call that prejudice or ignorance, or both, if you like."

"In old days," observed Wilfrid, "you did, I remember, allow a few exceptions."

"So I do now. You were one of the exceptions, and I trust you will remain one. Only don't say anything about your political opinions, please; because I know what Sir John Elles's were, and I would rather not hear that you had inherited them."

That being so, Wilfrid observed the silence requested of him. To avow himself an incipient Home Ruler under the roof of an Irish landlord would have been almost insulting; and, after all, he did not as yet know for certain what he was. So he more or

less adroitly turned the conversation into different channels, and heard, among other things, that Rathfinnan Abbey was shortly to be the scene of a grand amateur theatrical entertainment, in which Miss Power was to assume the leading part.

“Proceeds to be handed to a fund for the relief of distressed Irish ladies,” she explained. “I am sure I might claim a share in them; but, as a matter of fact, we are not actually ruined yet—only going to be. And when we are—”

“Yes!” said Wilfrid, interrogatively, as she paused.

“No; I won’t say what I was on the point of saying: it would bring us rather too near to politics for safety. I wish I had known a few days ago that you were coming; I dare say I could have found a part for you in one of the plays.”

“Then I am very glad you didn’t know; for I doubt whether I could even get on or off the stage without disgracing myself. The part for which I am best fitted is that of a spectator. I can applaud as loudly as anybody, and I will.”

“Well, if you applaud with discrimination one will be duly grateful. As the room will be full of our friends and neighbors, I am afraid we must expect to be vociferously acclaimed, however bad we may be; but perhaps you will tell me afterwards in confidence what you honestly think of me as an actress.”

Wilfrid had forgotten the girl’s expressed determination to earn her living upon the stage; but this speech reminded him of it, and he was about to say that he did hope she had abandoned so preposterous a project when Mr. Power, suddenly waking up, remarked, with the solemn irrelevance characteristic

of those who wish to show that they have not lost consciousness for a moment :

“Oh, I’m quite with you there ; it was kindly meant, no doubt. All I say is that it was ingeniously inopportune, and that Lord Spencer ought to have known better than to encourage it. Dublin, if you like, and Belfast, of course ; but what the deuce was to be looked for from Cork, except dead cats and rotten eggs, and maybe something worse ?”

He was alluding, it appeared, to the visit of the Prince and Princess of Wales to Ireland, which, indeed, had not proved a very brilliant success, and he went on rather testily to assure Wilfrid (who had not opened his lips) that he knew nothing whatever about the country.

“I almost despair of ever knowing anything about it,” the young man submissively rejoined.

“Then, my dear fellow, you are in a fair way towards becoming wise. The one lesson which you Englishmen require to learn is that you never will and never can understand us.”

“I am going to bed,” said Nora, getting up. “There will be wigs on the green presently, I see, and the chances are that you would both of you fall upon me if I tried to stand between you.”

But there was no quarrel in the smoking-room after her exit. Mr. Power good-humoredly apologized, acknowledging that he had indulged in forty winks and had failed to catch his guest’s last remarks ; while Wilfrid disclaimed all responsibility for or approval of the movements of royal personages.

“Only I wish,” he ventured to add, “that Irishmen of all parties would give us credit for being anx-

ious to do the straight thing. The majority of us really do wish to be just—and generous into the bargain.”

“H’m!” returned Mr. Power. “Well, I won’t contradict you; but I should have thought that what the majority and the minority of you especially wanted to do was to secure the Irish vote. However, we won’t talk about it.”

CHAPTER XI

GROWN-UP NORA

MR. POWER professed to be, and doubtless was, unwilling to make contentious matter a subject of conversation ; yet he could hardly walk round the grounds with his visitor, as he did on the following morning, and refrain from any allusion to the circumstance that they were followed at a respectful distance by two stalwart members of the Royal Irish Constabulary. It was perhaps necessary, he said, that he should be thus escorted ; really, he didn't know. It was, at all events, an intolerable nuisance, which reconciled him in some measure to his impending departure from Ireland.

“ You are leaving Rathfinnan, then ? ” Wilfrid asked.

“ Needs must, my dear fellow, when Gladstone and Parnell and our good friend Fitzpatrick join together in driving. Between them they have managed to make the place too hot to hold me, and even if I didn't mind being scowled at and occasionally stoned by fellows whom I've been trying all my life to befriend, I couldn't afford to go on living here upon such odds and ends of rent as I still receive. My principal reason for going over to London was to find some cheap abode in the dreariest district of West

Kensington ; and a lease of Rathfinnan Abbey is now to be obtained on exceptionally favorable terms by any English sportsman who likes to make a bid for it. What offers ?”

“But surely,” said Wilfrid, who, with a country-house which he did not want already upon his hands, was in no position to respond to that hint, “you don’t mean that you are being driven out of house and home by agrarian agitators ! I thought things were quieter just now in the south of Ireland than they had been for some time past.”

“I mean,” answered Mr. Power, “that legislation and lawlessness have combined to rob me of something like two-thirds of my income ; I mean that, for the first time since I succeeded to the property, I have had to evict a solvent tenant for non-payment of rent ; I mean that when deputations come tramping up to my door to tell me that I must do this and that, and abstain from doing t’other, on pain of being starved into submission, all I can answer is, that they may go to blazes. So I suppose they are going there—and I’m going to London.”

He worked himself up into a very pretty passion, and became somewhat incoherent over his wrongs. Nevertheless, they were, as far as Wilfrid could gather, genuine wrongs. It is not easy to be a liberal and beneficent landlord when your means of subsistence have been taken away from you, nor can any landlord, liberal or otherwise, be expected to adopt such political action as his tenants may see fit to impose upon him. Some dictation of that nature seemed to have been attempted by Mr. Power’s tenants, and one result thereof was that he was now compelled

to submit to the irksome restraint of police protection. He spoke with a little bitterness of Mr. Fitzpatrick.

“Though I like the fellow’s pluck, and I don’t deny that his is the right line, he may end by being the salvation of us, as a class—who knows! Meanwhile, I, among others, must go to the wall. Of course, he could never carry on the game if he didn’t happen to be independent of his Irish estates.”

Later in the morning Wilfrid had a walk with Flurry, whom he found washing out the stable-yard, and who was terribly down in the mouth. Flurry was evidently afraid of saying too much, but he allowed it to be inferred that he deplored that eviction, and that, in his opinion, “the master” had been somewhat over-hasty. For the rest, the threatened exodus of the family naturally filled him with grief; and although it appeared that he and his wife were to be left in the house, upon sufficient board-wages, as caretakers, that prospect of dignified ease had no attraction for him.

“What ’ll I do at all without me horses?” he disconsolately asked.

Nora, for one, could not say. After luncheon she invited Wilfrid to stroll down towards the sea with her—“just in memory of two years ago”—and on the way she confessed frankly that it went to her heart to sever the ties which bound her and her father to old friends and old dependants. She was, however, quite clear that the severance ought to be and must be effected.

“With luck,” she said, “we ought to get a tenant for the place—some Englishman who is fond of fish-

ing and doesn't mind working rather hard to get a small bag of grouse. As for snipe and cock, he wouldn't find many estates in Ireland, and none in England, to beat Rathfinnan there."

For a moment Wilfrid was half-inclined to declare that such an Englishman as she described was ready to her hand; but he smothered the foolish inclination. His obvious destiny lay elsewhere, and he only asked:

"Won't it be rather a wrench for your father to leave Ireland?"

"Of course, it will; but when once the wrench is over he will feel more easy. It is miserable—it isn't even safe—for him to stay on here. We can't afford it, either. In one way I am almost glad that he has had to accept police protection; he hates it so, and it helps him to face what would have had to come sooner or later. He thinks the people have behaved very ungratefully to him, and so they have; but"—she sighed, and added: "It isn't their fault; it's other people's fault—principally yours."

"Mine?"

"Well, Mr. Gladstone's. Lord Salisbury's too, I dare say; for I doubt whether there is much to choose between them. Whichever side may chance to be in office, we are pretty sure to be thrown to the wolves. And do you know why?"

"Perhaps because some of you—not Mr. Power, but a certain number of Irish landlords—deserve it," Wilfrid hazarded.

"Oh, dear, no! Only because we aren't strong enough to be troublesome or dangerous. Englishmen always boast of standing up for the oppressed; but

I notice that they don't begin to do that until they are convinced that the oppressed are capable of standing up for themselves. A good many of you are becoming convinced now that the National League represents an oppressed nation. Ten more Parnellite members would remove all lingering doubt from your minds."

"You are rather unfair to us," Wilfrid remarked.

"You think so? I wonder whether you would think so if we could change places. But we didn't come out to argue about subjects upon which it is impossible that we should ever agree. Sit down here, and I'll give you an account of the plays in which I'm going to act. Then you can let me have the unbiassed opinion that I want upon my notion of the way in which my parts ought to be interpreted."

It was upon the self-same promontory whence Nora had once hurried down to cast herself into the sea that he seated himself, as he was bidden, and listened, not very attentively, to her description of a couple of dramatic trifles. The narrator interested him more than the narration; and this was scarcely surprising, considering how pretty the former was. Strictly speaking, she was not, perhaps, as beautiful as Lady Laura Mayne; but she was beyond all comparison more charming. Her expression varied every instant; her delicate color came and went; her eyes, which met his without a shade of embarrassment or self-consciousness, seemed to him to reveal in their depths all that a woman's eyes ought to reveal. She would certainly, ere long, make somebody or other the happiest man in the world. But "somebody," it was to be

feared, would not be a despised Englishman. He was heaving a sympathetic sigh over the disabilities of the dominant race when he was recalled to the business in hand by an abrupt query.

“Well? Do you think the character can be represented like that?”

“Oh, I should think so,” he hastened to reply, guiltily conscious of having allowed his thoughts to wander. “In fact, I should think you might represent it exactly as you please. Anything that you liked to make of that or any other character would be perfect!”

The girl stared at him, first in perplexity, then in displeasure.

“Oh, I see,” she returned at length; “you haven’t been listening. Of course, it wasn’t worth your while to listen, and I apologize for being such a ruthless bore. I forgot that these amateur performances couldn’t possibly interest you as they do me.”

It was obviously Wilfrid’s turn to apologize, and he did so with much earnestness. He might have borrowed the poet’s plea to Zeus, and said:

“Verzeih dem Geiste der, von deinem Lichte
Berauscht, das Irdische verlor!”

but a sort of shy scrupulousness restrained him. The girl had treated him as a friend, and he ought not to take advantage of the opportunity for making overtures towards a flirtation. Besides, she would undoubtedly resent it if he did.

She did not, he was glad to discover, very deeply resent his absence of mind. She forgave it, at all events; and although she declined to say what he had

failed to hear all over again, she professed herself willing and anxious to continue the conversation.

“This time you shall talk and I will play audience,” she said. “I promise not to fall asleep, however egotistical you may be; for I want very much to know what you are nowadays, and what you have been doing, and what you are going to do.”

He began by declaring that zero was a truthful and concise reply to all three questions; but a little pressure induced him to avow that, as regarded the third, he was not altogether without hope of being able to arrive at some less unsatisfactory result. He did not very much mind talking about himself—alas! which of us does, under stress of feminine encouragement?—and at the expiration of twenty minutes or so Miss Power had been told all that there was to tell respecting his inchoate plans for the future. She had likewise by that time heard a good deal about Lady Virginia Lethbridge and Lady Laura Mayne, and she surprised Wilfrid by unhesitatingly pronouncing the former lady to be a goose.

“I must have described her very badly to have given you that impression,” he declared. “Her extreme Radicalism may or may not be nonsense—very likely it is, and very likely she does not literally mean all that she says—but I am sure you would admit, if you knew her, that she is at least a clever woman.”

Nora, with her hands clasped round her knees, and her eyes scanning the horizon, was equally sure that she would admit no such thing. “Not that it matters; because nothing is more improbable than that I shall ever meet your Lady Virginia. But I

can see her from here : she isn't in the least uncommon. The other one sounds much more original."

Now, Wilfrid thought that Lady Virginia was decidedly original. He also thought that the facilities afforded by residence in a boarding-school at Passy for forming judgments upon women of the world could not be very extensive. But perhaps Nora, like the rest of her sex, knew more things than she was supposed to know. She resembled other members of her sex, at any rate, in being capable of causing uneasiness to those who took a kindly interest in her, and although on that particular afternoon she submitted with a good grace to a gentle snub on the part of one older and more experienced than herself, she turned the tables on him next day, when he was privileged to attend a rehearsal whereat she took the lead.

She turned the tables, that is to say, in so far as that she demonstrated to him the absurdity of treating her as a mere school-girl. Her fellow actors and actresses (the former were both more numerous and more forward than the latter, he noticed) manifestly did not regard her in that light. They bowed without a murmur to her outspoken criticisms upon their several performances ; they humbly endeavored to obey her instructions ; they paid willing homage to her superior talent—or was it, perhaps, to something else which they were rather more capable of appreciating than talent ? Anyhow, the laws of good-breeding have never been held to forbid some outward recognition of the claims of beauty ; so that there was really no excuse for adopting a sour and supercilious attitude towards those poor young men and inwardly

stigmatizing them as "buckeens." As a matter of fact, they were not buckeens. Some of them were soldier's from a neighboring station, some were representatives of the local nobility and gentry; all were harmless enough, and of course it was no fault of theirs that the action of the play compelled them, every now and then, to address Miss Power in fervid language and even to hold her in an audacious embrace. However, they ought not to have insisted upon rehearsing so often the very passages which appeared to present no difficulties at all to them.

"To tell you the honest truth," Wilfrid said, in answer to a question which was addressed to him after the departure of a merry and slightly uproarious party, "I rather hate private theatricals. I mean, I shouldn't much like to see a sister of mine taking part in them."

"That I can well believe," observed Nora; "but as I haven't the honor of being your sister—"

"As I haven't the honor of being your brother, Miss Power, there is no reason in the world why I shouldn't congratulate you. It seemed to me that you acted your part to perfection—especially in the love scenes."

Nora drew her brows together. "What a thorough Englishman you are!" she exclaimed. And then, after a momentary pause. "One can never be thankful enough that one was born of an inferior race!"

CHAPTER XII

THE WISDOM OF WILFRID

WILFRID went off to fish the lake, all alone, the next day—Mr. Power having been called away on magisterial business—and perhaps he had some hope that Nora would herself come out with the luncheon-basket—which she kindly promised to send him by one o'clock. But it was a ragged hobbledehoy who appeared upon the bank with refreshments at the appointed hour; and this, added to the circumstance that he had not had a single rise the whole morning, caused the young man to mutter despondently, as he seated himself in the bottom of the boat, “Oh, it isn't my day—that's very evident!”

No doubt he had offended Miss Power by what he had said upon the subject of private theatricals; and that was annoying, because he really liked the girl and wanted to be good friends with her. Moreover, it was ridiculous to quarrel with one's hostess, and not altogether agreeable to suspect that one was so completely misunderstood by her as to be considered a bit of a prig. Possibly he had spoken rather like a prig; possibly the best thing he could do would be to go back to the house and offer apologetic explanations. Further meditation over a digestive pipe convinced him that this would

be the wisest course. The weather was anything but suitable for fishing, nor, for some reason or other, did he feel particularly keen about sport just then. So he took his rod to pieces, pulled ashore, and trudged up to the abbey—only to find, on his arrival, that a wagonette, a car, and two dog-carts were waiting at the door.

“Hang it all!” he ejaculated, in disgust; “another confounded rehearsal, I suppose.”

There could be no doubt about that. As he approached the dining-room door, he distinctly heard the declaiming voices of the actors within, but what made him turn the handle he hardly knew, considering that the previous afternoon’s performance had afforded him so very little amusement. However, he did turn the handle, and found himself in a darkened room; for this, it seemed, was a full-dress rehearsal, and the stage had already been set up. Three or four ladies—chaperons, no doubt—were seated in the obscurity of the auditorium. They did not notice the entrance of the intruder, who noiselessly took up his station behind them and stared over their heads at the scene beyond the glaring footlights. It was a scene which he had witnessed twenty-four hours earlier and had not liked. He liked it still less now; though he was fain to admit that it was being better done, and that the eighteenth-century costume which Nora wore was marvellously becoming to her.

“I love you! I adore you!” the gentleman with powdered hair and silk stockings who knelt at her feet was bawling.

The words, somehow, sounded singularly offensive,

while the action which followed them was enough to make any man's blood boil. So, at least, Wilfrid was disposed to assert until he realized that his own blood would not have risen above normal temperature had any other lady of his acquaintance been playing the part assigned to Miss Nora Power; and such a discovery obviously rendered it imperative upon him to sit down and reflect.

It was about a quarter of an hour later that he quietly slipped out of the room and escaped into the fresh air, his reflections during that interval having been of a sorrowful and despondent nature. No doubt he was rich, well conducted, and not worse-looking than another; so that the fact of his having suddenly become aware that he loved the daughter of an out-at-elbows Irish squire ought not, upon the face of it, to have thrown him into a state of hopeless dejection. But the unfortunate thing was that Nora Power was not, and never would be, in love with him. He was as sure of that as he was (for his sins) that he would never love anybody but her; and to be accepted merely because he was eligible was by no means what he desired. These are the little tragedies of life; seldom recognized as such—*caerent quia vate sacro*—but common as blackberries in autumn, and productive of a vast amount of more or less silent misery, whether the marriage comes off or not. As a general rule, of course, the marriage does come off; but Wilfrid then and there resolved that his case should be exceptional. He was neither blind nor a fool; he knew very well that he could offer inducements which, to a girl situated as Nora was, might prove almost irresistible. He divined

also that Mr. Power's hospitality was not wholly and absolutely disinterested. Now there was nothing to complain of or to object to in that; it was simply Mr. Power's duty to marry his daughter well, if he could.

"But my simple duty," Wilfrid concluded, with a deep sigh, "is to leave her free. And even if that weren't my duty, it would be my inclination. It's rather hard luck to be hit like this—because I am not a very susceptible sort of person—and it's worse luck that there isn't the slightest chance of her reciprocating; but, at least, it is something to see quite clearly what can be helped and what can't."

His diffidence, which was somewhat akin to that of a plain-featured heiress, may have been a trifle overstrained; yet his conclusions—always supposing that he had read Nora Power aright—were doubtless wise. And the truth is that her demeanor gave him no ground at all for hoping that he had misinterpreted her. He did not make the apology which he had contemplated making, nor did she appear to expect anything of the kind. During that evening, and in the course of the two ensuing days, she treated him with the utmost amiability, while contriving, after some subtle fashion, to convey to him that they were not upon terms of close intimacy. More than once she took incidental occasion to let fall some disparaging criticism upon the ways and manners of Englishmen in general, and not once did she allude to the theatricals, of which he had made so bold as to disapprove. Her time, however, was almost entirely taken up in making preparations for them; so that Wilfrid, who was left to his own de-

vices (was it merely accident that caused Mr. Power to absent himself after breakfast every morning?), could not greatly enjoy a visit which he resolved to terminate as soon as the performance should have taken place.

On the appointed evening he found himself one of a crowd of spectators so large that the spacious dining-room could scarcely accommodate them. Possibly the quasi-political character of the entertainment had attracted ticket-holders from a distance; possibly Miss Power's fame was more widespread in her own country than an ignorant Briton had suspected. Be that as it may, the triumphant success of both pieces was so completely hers that her coadjutors might as well have been so many dummies. Nobody noticed them; nobody mentioned their names; the enthusiastic applause of the audience was reserved for Nora, who was called before the curtain again and again, and to whom all the bouquets in the room were thrown or carried.

In common justice, it had to be confessed that she had earned her ovation. That she looked lovely was a matter of course; but she had also acted extremely well, in the opinion of one of her admirers, who could not contemplate without misgivings the effect which this comparatively small victory was likely to have upon her. A lady in a diamond tiara who sat near him, and whom he knew by sight as the wife of a great Irish peer, asked her neighbor whether it was a fact that the girl meant to adopt the stage as a profession.

“Somebody told me that she did, and really I quite hope she will. So much better than going out as a

governess or setting up a bonnet-shop! What do you say? Her father doesn't know? Oh, well, of course, I won't breathe a word to him about it; but he will be an idiot if he objects. We are all in the same boat, you know. Personally, I expect to end my days in the workhouse."

"I am afraid," said the gentleman addressed, "that neither you nor I would have much chance of obtaining relief from an Irish Board of Guardians. All I am likely to get from a grateful country is a bullet through my head. At least, so I am assured nowadays by almost every post; and Power tells me that he is in no better case than I am."

"He must be in a very much worse case, as far as money is concerned, poor man!"

"Well, yes; I suppose so. Upon the whole, I am glad he is leaving the country. Under all the circumstances, it is the wisest thing he could do, perhaps."

Wilfrid recognized the speaker, who, after the final fall of the curtain, caught sight of him and held out his hand, saying: "The last time we met was in this house, two years ago. I dare say you don't remember me."

"I remember you very well, Mr. Fitzpatrick," the young man answered; "and I remember your telling me that you had put your hand to a disheartening piece of work. You have stuck to it, though, and you have made a good job of it, by all accounts."

Mr. Fitzpatrick shrugged his shoulders. "Oh, a good job—I don't know about that. I have done what was possible, and you may assure your friends that I shall go on fighting up to the end."

"My friends?" said Wilfrid, interrogatively.

“Well, Lady Virginia’s friends,” returned the other, laughing. “For the matter of that, you may give the same assurance to friends of a different way of thinking who are nearer to us at this moment, and who stand in some need of encouragement.”

Wilfrid did not care to notice the allusion to Lady Virginia Lethbridge; but he observed, dispassionately, that everybody must respect a good fighter, whether he was in the right or in the wrong, and that he knew how manfully Mr. Fitzpatrick was fighting on behalf of the landlords of Ireland.

Mr. Fitzpatrick acknowledged the compliment with a little bow, and closed his lips rather tightly. He looked as if he might have said a good deal, but did not think it worth while to do so. However, just before he was swept away by the ebbing crowd he remarked:

“Unfortunately, no campaign can be carried on without casualties. So Power goes to West Kensington and Miss Nora, perhaps—who knows?—to Drury Lane.”

Wilfrid remained under the painful impression produced by this parting shot, which struck him, somehow, with the force of a personal reproach. He did not—Heaven was his witness!—want to drive Mr. Power into exile; still less did he wish to see Nora earning a livelihood upon the boards of a London theatre. He was not even in favor of legislation that could involve injustice to anybody. Nevertheless, he was afraid that he did belong to the ranks of those whom Mr. Fitzpatrick and Mr. Power and Nora regarded as enemies, and of course it is not very pleasant to be regarded as an enemy by the

girl whom you love, fully alive though you may be to the melancholy fact that, at best, she can never look upon you as more than a friend. For the present he was, at all events, an ostensible friend, and in that capacity he could do no less than avail himself of the earliest opportunity to congratulate her upon her triumph. This duty he discharged to her apparent satisfaction; but as the other amateurs remained in the house to partake of a prolonged, nondescript meal, and did not leave until a late hour, she had not a great deal of leisure or attention to bestow upon him. His own imminent departure from Rathfinnan, which he made known in a modest parenthesis, and which Mr. Power was so kind as to receive with cries of consternation, moved her to no more than a conventional, indispensable expression of regret.

The following day, which was to be his last in Ireland (for, in spite of Mr. Power's hospitable entreaties, he adhered to his determination of travelling by the night mail to Dublin, *en route* for Kingstown and Holyhead) proved again creditable to the much-abused Kerry climate which had always treated him so well. It was a sin to waste such a fine morning in-doors, he made bold to remark during breakfast; but this hint met with no response, save from Mr. Power, who deplored the necessity of attending to correspondence; so presently he strolled out alone on a farewell ramble towards the river. Upon the bank of that clear stream he ended by seating himself—a little provoked with the smiling landscape, even as the poet was once provoked with the banks and braes of bonny Doon, and for reasons equally cogent.

“You look,” said Nora’s voice suddenly from behind him, “like a naughty little boy who has gone off to sulk all by himself.”

He scrambled to his feet, delighted to see her; though the mere fact of her having followed him would have proved, if he had needed proof, how far she was of thinking of him as a possible lover.

“I am neither naughty nor sulky,” he declared. “If I am all by myself, that is because nobody seemed inclined to keep me company.”

“I waited in vain for an invitation. Not getting one, I have had to pocket my pride, as you see. I really couldn’t let you leave Rathfinnan without one last confabulation.”

She appeared to be in a very good humor; she confessed, indeed, that she was, and that the praises which she had received on the previous day had elated her. But what she wanted to hear—“from a person who isn’t at all likely to pay me insincere compliments”—was how much those praises might be really worth. This was a practical question, she added, and she would be grateful for a practical reply.

She received what Wilfrid flattered himself was at least an honest one. He would not pretend to misunderstand her, he said, nor could he pretend to think that it was desirable for any lady to adopt the career of a professional actress. He was proceeding to expatiate at some length upon this thesis when she interrupted him.

“Oh, yes, I know all that: after a fashion, I even agree with you. But it isn’t very much to the point, is it? The point is—am I good enough to get an engagement?”

Wilfrid declared that he was no judge. On being pressed, he had to say that he supposed she was. He did not say, though he knew, that her beauty would probably command what her talent might fail to secure. But he persevered with remonstrances of which the futility became, after a time, so manifest that he was fain to wind up with—

“Well, one comfort is that you will have to obtain your father’s consent. And I don’t believe he will ever give it.”

Nora’s smile seemed to imply that she had no serious apprehensions on that score; but she only remarked, “You certainly are very English!”

“So you are fond of telling me; and as you are also fond of asserting that you abhor all Englishmen, I don’t feel flattered.”

“Oh, come! you wouldn’t like to be told that you were not English. And if you want flattery, you have only to apply to your Lady Virginia, who, I am sure, will give you as much of it as you can swallow. Anyhow, we mustn’t quarrel on your last day.”

So they had a long and perfectly amicable chat about subjects in which neither of them felt any overwhelming interest. A quarrel, followed by a reconciliation, might have been preferable, Wilfrid thought; but that was rather inconsistent of him, seeing that he had abandoned all hope of ever winning Miss Power’s affection.

CHAPTER XIII

AT HECKINGLEY

LADY VIRGINIA, back from Paris after the Easter recess, lost no time in summoning to her hospitable board a young man who had asserted his independence after a fashion quite unusual on the part of her protégés. She did not, however, flatter his vanity by taking the least notice of him until after dinner, when she beckoned him imperatively into one of the nooks provided by her very modern drawing-room for purposes of private conversation.

“I don’t want to be indiscreet,” she began, “but it would be interesting to hear what you have been about all this time. Can one be told, or can’t one? If one can’t, we’ll change the subject.”

Wilfrid laughed and assured his questioner that he had been doing nothing unfit for publication. He had only been paying a visit to a highly respectable family in the south of Ireland, and picking up such additional information as had been obtainable with regard to the state of the country.

“Oh, but this is serious, this is !” exclaimed Lady Virginia. “It sounds very much as if you had been swallowing poison and would require an antidote. But, of course, you didn’t believe all they told you.”

“They told me next to nothing. The eloquent

facts are that they are all ruined, that they live under police protection, and that they expect soon to abandon their home, because they can't afford to keep it up. Yet Mr. Power is not accused of being a bad landlord. He is threatened with eviction, as I understand, not because he has evicted one tenant who could pay and wouldn't pay, but because he declines to submit to political dictation. How will you justify that sort of thing, I wonder?"

"Oh, I don't," answered Lady Virginia, airily; "it's as unjustifiable as—well, as Garibaldi's Sicilian campaign, shall we say? Nobody denies that there are some decent landlords in Ireland; but landlordism has to be abolished, all the same, and occasional hard cases can't be helped. What does this Mr. Power consist of?—how many Powers, I mean?—father, mother, and a dozen or so of chicks, I suppose."

"No mother, and only one chick at present in the nest," answered Wilfrid.

He was not very anxious to describe Nora, but was made to do so in full detail, and was promptly charged with having lost his heart to the girl. Excusable prevarication saved him from telling a downright lie, and, of course, he said nothing about Nora's histrionic leanings; but it was evident that Lady Virginia's suspicions were not completely allayed, nor had she much political instruction to give him that evening. Some allusion to the Afghan and Soudanese embarrassments of the Ministry, and a prediction that the constituencies must shortly be appealed to, comprised all that she had to say upon public affairs.

"I only hope we shall be beaten before the gen-

eral election comes," she added: "the outs always have such a much better chance than the ins."

A similar hope may not impossibly have been entertained in more exalted quarters. The Liberal party at that time was not precisely a happy family; certain members of the Cabinet were known to be strongly opposed to the renewal of the Irish Crimes Act; the policy of abandoning the Soudan, after all the expenditure of lives and money involved in the recent campaign, was not very popular either in the House or out of it; the general condition of things was such that defeat might be expected to bring more profit to the vanquished than to the victors. The Ministry, however, managed to scrape through some critical divisions, and by Whitsuntide it looked as if they were tolerably sure of retaining office, whether they wished to do so or not. During those spring weeks Wilfrid had an agreeably easy and irresponsible time of it. One thing, Lady Virginia said—and he was extremely glad to hear her say it—was certain: he could not now be expected to seek election to a moribund Parliament; she even doubted whether he would not be a great fool to do so. As soon as the approaching dissolution should have become an accomplished fact, it would, of course, behoove him to take the field, and she gave him to understand that she had in her mind's eye a constituency ready to welcome him.

Meanwhile, he was a frequent visitor in Tilney Street, where many opportunities were, intentionally or accidentally, afforded him of developing his acquaintance with Lady Laura. And of these he was not slow to take advantage when he became con-

vinced, as he very soon did, that the girl had no designs upon his celibacy. He fancied, moreover, that she had recognized with equal satisfaction his own innocence of any desire to pay court to her. However that may have been, a species of friendship sprang up between them which at times even went so far as to bring about an interchange of half-confidences. Thus Lady Laura was made aware that, for reasons which it was needless to particularize, Mr. Elles was likely to live and die a bachelor; thus, too, Wilfrid learned that Lady Laura, for her part, would contemplate with a good deal of equanimity the career of an old maid.

“Not,” she frankly added, “that there is much chance of my being allowed to remain single. When one hasn’t a home of one’s own, nor any income worth mentioning, one must end by obeying orders, I suppose. The utmost that one can do is to stave off the evil day as long as possible.”

“It is always possible,” Wilfrid remarked, “to say ‘I won’t!’”

Lady Laura’s languid eyes displayed a faint gleam of passing amusement.

“Oh, for you it ought to be possible—though I am not sure that you will find it so—but in my case it really wouldn’t be worth the prodigious amount of trouble that saying ‘I won’t’ would involve. What I look forward to is some wealthy and amiable old gentleman who would spend a good deal of his time away from home. A sort of Sir Samuel Bland would do very well. Only I should like to hold him at bay for another year or two, if I could.”

Such speeches as the above were of a nature to

promote mutual understanding and something like a tacit alliance. Wilfrid guessed that Lady Laura, like himself, was the victim of some hopeless attachment, and he perceived that they might be of service to one another by means of a little harmless dissimulation. He was, therefore, ostensibly attentive to Lady Virginia's sister, who, on her side, had ceased to yawn in his face. Still, it must be confessed, that he did not accept invitations to Tilney Street for the sake of meeting her.

"I don't think I will," he said, in a slightly ag-grieved tone, one evening, when the lady of the house, on wishing him good-night, asked him to join a luncheon-party the next day. "What is the use of my perpetually coming here if I am never to be allowed a word with you?"

"I thought," answered her ladyship, with a demure smile, "that you had had all the words you could want with me. From the moment that you are a convinced Radical and a sound Home Ruler—"

"I have never professed to be any such thing! And is it absolutely necessary that conversation should be restricted to political subjects?"

Lady Virginia's smile broadened. She could afford to smile as broadly as she liked; for more perfect teeth were never seen in a human head.

"Do you like talking to me?" she innocently in-quired.

"Don't you think I should be a rather extraordi-nary sort of person if I didn't?"

After a brief and pensive consideration of this query, Lady Virginia nodded her pretty little head. "I dare say you would," she agreed. "Now that

you mention it, the ordinary person certainly does seem to like talking to me. That's why there isn't time in London for one's friends. At Whitsuntide," she added, presently, "we are all going down to Heckingley to rusticate for a week. Would you care to come?—or are the attractions of Kerry too powerful to be resisted?"

Heckingley was the name of Mr. Lethbridge's place in Northamptonshire—a recently restored red-brick mansion, surrounded by charming pleasure gardens, and approached by an avenue of spreading limes which were renowned throughout the county. The house was full of visitors when Wilfrid arrived (for it is needless to say that he had willingly accepted the invitation vouchsafed to him), and on taking his place somewhere about the middle of the long dinner-table, he said to himself rather disconsolately that this, after all, was only London again in a pseudo-provincial setting. However, it was going to be rather better than that. Lady Virginia, before the evening was at an end, kindly found an occasion to assure him that it was, and when she took him out for a ride on the ensuing morning, without even a groom to impair the privacy of their conversation, he felt that she was doing her best to keep her word.

"I have been thinking a great deal about you lately," was her gratifying announcement while, mounted upon a couple of steady, quiet cobs, they were pacing down one of the long, grassy rides which intersected the Heckingley woods, "and, as so often happens when one begins to bother about people or things, circumstances have obligingly shaped themselves to fit the case. Not that I don't sincerely

regret poor old Mr. Jessop's having had a stroke ; still, since he was to have it, one does feel that he has chosen his moment well, especially as he is rallying, and won't, I believe, resign his seat before the dissolution. But he can't, of course, think of facing the fatigue of another election ; so—there you are ! I am delighted to think that you will represent our part of the world."

Wilfrid thanked her, but demurred. In the first place, what assurance had he that his candidature would be acceptable to the constituency and to the party ?

"That," answered Lady Virginia, "will be all right. Without vanity, I may say that my candidate will start very favorably handicapped ; added to which, I settled the whole thing before leaving London. The agricultural laborers will vote like one man for a Radical, and—"

"But am I a Radical ?"

"Don't be tiresome ! You are a Liberal, anyhow—an advanced Liberal. If you deny that I will never speak to you again !"

"Under those circumstances," said Wilfrid, "I will not venture to deny it. I am an advanced Liberal."

"Yes, and you will have to say some rather advanced things, I think. However, that can wait ; I will coach you up when the time comes. One thing I think you ought to do, and that is to take a house somewhere in this neighborhood, even if it is only a shooting-box. By the way, you have a house of your own in one of the home counties, haven't you ?"

"Yes ; there is my uncle's place in Kent ; but I

am glad to say that I have just succeeded in letting it for a term of years."

"Really? Well, that has the advantage of leaving you free; but it was a rather funny thing to do. You will want a country-house of some sort, I presume?"

"A country-house," Wilfrid remarked, "is more or less of a white elephant to a bachelor."

"But, my poor friend, you can't really think that you will be a bachelor much longer. Even if you wished for such a thing—which you have no business to do—it would be quite out of the question."

"Supposing one didn't happen to be in love with anybody?"

"That has absolutely nothing to do with it."

"Or that one happened to be in love with somebody whom one couldn't marry?"

The dimple on Lady Virginia's cheek became slightly more accentuated.

"That," she replied, "would be almost immoral; and I am sure anything approaching immorality is foreign to your nature. You must try to fall in love with somebody whom you can marry. Really, it ought not to be difficult!"

He changed a dangerous subject with some precipitation. He was not particularly eager to discuss Home Rule; still, as he had one or two hard nuts, connected with that question, ready for cracking, and as he knew that Lady Virginia, when once mounted on her hobby, might be trusted to ride it far and long, he offered her these. Thus, for the moment, Apollo preserved him.

But, as the days went on, he could not but perceive

that, unless he meant eventually to propose to Lady Laura Mayne, he was accepting a somewhat equivocal position. In a hundred trifling ways he was made aware that his fellow-guests believed him to be at Heckingley for that purpose ; his host, who always had the air of regarding him with a certain amused compassion, conveyed some veiled hints (or were they intended for warnings ?) to him to the same effect ; he was perpetually finding himself alone with the girl, and although he would have preferred to be alone with her sister, her company was not distasteful to him. To be sure, if he did propose, he would unquestionably be rejected ; there was comfort and assurance of safety in that reflection.

“ And even if, by an impossibility, I were to be accepted ?” he went so far as to say to himself upon one occasion. “ Admitting, as I do admit, that I can no more hope to escape matrimony than death, wouldn’t a girl who will certainly never be enamoured of me, and who appears to be blessed with a placid temperament, in addition to other fine attributes, be about the wisest selection that I could make ?”

It is not at Wilfrid Elles’s age that such eminently sane views can be seriously entertained. The truth was that he despaired of Nora Power, that he was a little piqued by her evident indifference, and that he would not be very sorry to show her that what she despised was not regarded as beneath notice by a lady who was certainly her superior in rank, perhaps also in beauty. But at the bottom of his heart he had no intention of marrying Lady Laura Mayne or anybody else ; and as, to all appearance, Lady Laura

had not the least intention of marrying him, it was easy enough for the pair of them to throw dust in other people's eyes.

The Heckingley house-party broke up immediately after the reassembling of Parliament; and in the early days of June, Ministers, having been defeated on an amendment to the Budget, decided to resign office.

“I told you how it would be!” cried Lady Virginia, exultantly. “Now, all we have to do is to give the Tories rope enough to hang themselves.”

“And when they have been hanged?” Wilfrid asked.

“Then we shall see what we shall see. But I think I can tell you what we shall never see again, and that is coercion for Ireland. The Tories won't dare to propose it, and won't be able to govern without it, so our course will be tolerably clear by the time that we are called upon to replace them.”

“I don't quite follow you,” Wilfrid said.

“You needn't. I remember your mentioning once before that you were ready to follow your leader, which is all that will be required of you—in a public sense.”

Wilfrid expressed a hope that he was doing all that was required of him in a private sense; but Lady Virginia, who had turned away to speak to somebody else, did not notice the remark.

CHAPTER XIV

HER LADYSHIP'S BROTHER

IN the summer of 1885, as all the world knows, Lord Salisbury, after some delays and difficulties, consented to form an Administration which could only exist on sufferance until the end of the session. The path of the new government was, after a fashion, made more easy by the fact that it was practically impossible at that advanced period of the year to renew the Crimes Act; but their own followers were not entirely pleased with their Irish policy, and it was freely asserted that some sort of an understanding had been arrived at with Mr. Parnell.

“And why not?” Wilfrid Elles inquired of the lady who directed his political conscience. “If it is right and desirable to conciliate the Irish leaders, why shouldn't we rejoice over Lord Carnarvon, as over a sinner that repenteth?”

“Because it isn't the game,” Lady Virginia replied, rather sharply. “Because a Conservative Home Ruler is a contradiction in terms. Because, in a word, these people ought to be ashamed of themselves for trying to cling to office by such tricks.”

“Then,” observed Wilfrid, with the air of a candid seeker after information, “I presume our cue is

to say ditto to Lord Spencer, and oppose any concessions to the party of disorder."

"Your cue," he was told, "is to hold your tongue. You aren't in Parliament yet, so there isn't the slightest necessity for you to speak. When you have been elected, or soon afterwards, a really enlightened programme will probably be submitted to you."

"Which I shall swallow?"

"Which I have no doubt you will swallow. It will be good for you, even if you don't quite like the taste of it at first; but I am in hopes that you will be sensible enough to like the taste of it."

Her meaning doubtless was that the leaders of the Liberal party, strengthened by the majority which they confidently expected to obtain at the approaching general election, would inaugurate their fresh lease of power by the introduction of a Home Rule Bill; but she must have been alone, or almost alone, in such an anticipation. If, as seemed likely, the Liberals were about to sweep the country, they would be independent of the Irish vote, and neither in Parliament nor out of it did those who conspicuously represented Liberalism hint at a surrender to Irish aspirations. The insignificant and partially convinced Liberal who acts the part of hero in the present narrative suspected that Lady Virginia's notions were visionary. The more he saw of what she called "the game," the less respect he felt for the players, and the more he became persuaded that nobody concerned in it (unless, perchance, it might be her ladyship, on the one side, and the Irish landlords on the other) was thoroughly in earnest. There had been, and still were, grievances to be redressed and in-

justices to be atoned for; but that these would be complacently shelved by a strong government, whether Conservative or Liberal, seemed to him pretty certain. The danger or the hope (it depended upon which way you looked at it) lay in the tenure of office by a weak government. Meanwhile Lord Ashbourne's Bill for facilitating the purchase of land, which met with no serious opposition, appeared to be a move in the right direction.

The business of the session, which it was nobody's interest or desire to delay, was advancing smoothly towards completion, when Wilfrid, dining one evening in Tilney Street, had the honor of being introduced to a peer who seldom or never made use of his legislative privileges. This was his hostess's brother, Lord Southfield, a rather good-looking young man of well-groomed appearance and with somewhat curt manners, renowned as a game-shot—renowned also (but this Wilfrid did not learn until later) for his assiduity in less healthy and creditable methods of enjoying life. His lordship, stiff and impassive at first, after the fashion affected by a certain class of modern young men, thawed perceptibly on being informed that Mr. Elles had lately returned from a sporting tour round the world. He himself had been through all that, he said, and was more than half inclined to do it again. Only the worst of it was that it cost such a lot of money. Besides which there were confounded duties connected with one's position which one wasn't allowed to neglect for any length of time.

“I should have thought,” remarked Mr. Lethbridge, “that you had reduced yours to a minimum.”

Lord Southfield took his cigarette out of his mouth (for it was after the ladies had left the dining-room that this conversation took place) and sighed plaintively.

"I've done my best," he said. "Ever since I succeeded, my one aim has been to preserve my personal liberty. But the thing can't be done, it seems. One is bound from time to time to be upon the spot. And then, don't you know, complications arise."

"Oh, I know there are apt to be complications—of a social kind," answered his brother-in-law, smiling; "but I have always understood that the recognized way of dissolving them was to plunge into the happy hunting-grounds of Asia, Africa, and America."

Lord Southfield, who had a fine command of countenance, stared blankly at the flowers with which the dinner-table was adorned.

"And so," he continued, "there's nothing for it but to make the best of the British Isles. Next winter, Tom, if you're good, you shall come over to the south of Ireland and shoot snipe with me. I won't have Virginia; it wouldn't be safe. She would be getting up a National League meeting, or something of that kind, in the house; and the old chap whose place I think of taking particularly warned me against talking politics. I told him I hadn't got any, so he said I should be all right then."

The "old chap" whose place Lord Southfield thought of taking was, it transpired, one of those luckless landlords for whom Lady Virginia had so little sympathy, and, having made the county of

Kerry somewhat too hot to hold him, he was willing to let his so-called abbey, with its contingent sporting advantages, upon extremely moderate terms.

“Rathfinnan isn’t half a bad house,” Lord Southfield added; “if I become Mr. Power’s tenant, I shall feel almost ashamed of paying him such a ridiculous rent. But, of course, there wouldn’t have been much sense in offering more than one was asked, and I’ve no spare money to throw away, Heaven knows!”

Wilfrid, as may be supposed, pricked up his ears at the sound of the above names, and he would have had some questions to ask had not Mr. Lethbridge selected that moment to start a discussion upon the vexed question of whether a snipe ought to be shot immediately after he rises or not. This led to further disputation of a kindred nature, so that it was not until a move had been made to the drawing-room that any opportunity arose for addressing interrogations to Mr. Power’s prospective tenant. And then they had to be made in the hearing of Lady Virginia, who displayed more curiosity than sympathy.

“Yes; I ran over to have a look at the place,” Lord Southfield said, “and I stayed a couple of days with the old gentleman and his daughter. Nice old gentleman—nice daughter, too.”

“Oh, the daughter is nice, is she?” said Lady Virginia. “Perhaps that may account for other people running over there and staying more than a couple of days. When you say nice you mean pretty, I suppose?”

“It is impossible,” answered her brother, gravely, “for a woman to be really nice without being pretty.”

Miss Power is awfully pretty, and I should say that she was awfully clever into the bargain."

"Dear me! She isn't let with the house by any chance, is she?"

Lord Southfield grinned.

"Unfortunately not. If she were, I should be prepared to pay double rent."

The joke, if such it could be called, struck Wilfrid as being in the worst possible taste, and he really could not understand what Lady Virginia found in it to laugh at so inordinately.

"Look at Mr. Elles's disgusted face!" she exclaimed, subduing her merriment. "Do you know what he is thinking?"

Lord Southfield's expressionless gaze implied that he neither knew nor particularly cared.

"He is thinking," Lady Virginia went on, "that it was unpardonably stupid of him not to forestall you by becoming the tenant of that attractive abbey."

Now, it so happened that that was precisely what Wilfrid was saying to himself, and it did not improve his humor to be so accurately interpreted. But Lord Southfield, who perhaps did not quite take his sister's meaning, made haste to say:

"Oh, well, I'm sorry if you wanted the shooting; but I may as well tell you at once that I have the refusal of it, and I can't let it slip through my fingers. The snipe alone, as far as I can hear, are well worth the price."

"It isn't the snipe," Lady Virginia returned; "it's the daughter."

Lord Southfield grinned again.

"But she is coming to London," he remarked.

He was apparently going to add something more ; but at that moment his attention was drawn away by a lady of somewhat conspicuously embellished charms who was one of his sister's guests, and beside whom he crossed the room to seat himself.

“Southfield,” Lady Virginia placidly and explanatorily remarked, “is a deplorable reprobate.”

“In what way ?” Wilfrid inquired.

“Oh, in the usual way, of course. When one says that sort of thing about a man, one doesn't mean that he is a thief or a forger. I trust, for the sake of her peace of mind, not to mention yours, that the young lady who is coming to London knows how to take care of herself.”

“Miss Power,” responded Wilfrid, with grave dignity, “is under the care of her father, who, I should imagine, will know how to protect her against any reprobates.”

After that he had to submit to a good deal of railery, during which his equanimity gradually returned to him. He had, after all, nothing to conceal, and he wound up by saying what was perfectly true :

“If you think that Miss Power is, or ever will be, anything more to me than a friend, you are quite mistaken.”

“My respectful congratulations to her upon that,” was the somewhat enigmatic rejoinder vouchsafed to him.

Lady Laura, who had drawn near and had listened to the latter part of a prolonged dialogue with her customary air of somnolent amusement, here put in a word.

“Why,” she asked, between two yawns, “is Miss Power coming to London?”

“I’m sure I don’t know,” Wilfrid replied.

But he was very much afraid that he did know, and something made him fear that Lord Southfield knew, too. He therefore timed his departure so as to coincide with that of the noble “reprobate” in question, and his hopes were realized when the latter, stepping into the hall to light a cigarette, remarked :

“Fine night. Going to walk?”

His fears likewise were confirmed soon afterwards ; for a conversation, initiated upon the subject of sport, and skilfully brought round through the famous snipe grounds of Kerry to Rathfinnan Abbey and its inmates, soon elicited from Lord Southfield the admission that Miss Power had consulted him with regard to her chances of obtaining a theatrical engagement.

“By the way, though,” he added, “I am not sure that it isn’t a secret. I wasn’t to say anything about it to her father, I know.”

“It is no secret to me,” Wilfrid said ; “she told me long ago what her ambition was. But of course I discouraged it.”

A gas-lamp revealed the dawning of a faint smile upon Lord Southfield’s face.

“Did you?” he returned ; “I didn’t. In fact, I rather hope that I may be able to secure a billet for her ; it so happens that I have a little influence with certain managers. She tells me that she can act a bit—and even if she couldn’t!— However, it’s all in the clouds as yet.”

“I sincerely trust it may remain there!” Wilfrid could not help exclaiming.

Possibly Lord Southfield thought that he had already been more communicative than was prudent or necessary. At all events, the silence with which he received this ejaculation seemed to suggest as much, and rendered it rather difficult to pursue the topic. After a pause, however, Wilfrid so far put his pride in his pocket as to ask :

“Do you mean that the thing is settled, then?”

“Eh?—settled?—what thing?” returned his companion. “Oh, about Miss Power! No; I don’t suppose any manager would engage her blind; she’ll have to see and be seen before she can conquer. I promised to do what I could, that was all.”

Everybody knows, or ought to know, the futility of attempting to divert a woman from any course of action to which she has made up her mind by reasoning with her. There are several ways of causing her to waver—the most promising being benign acquiescence—but it certainly is not a good plan to address her in a letter of grave, kindly remonstrance. And this was what the perturbed Wilfrid was unable, on reaching home, to restrain himself from doing.

He could not, he told his dear Miss Power, remain silent after what he had just heard. Even at the risk of giving offence, he must say how sorry he was that she should have confidentially consulted such a man as Lord Southfield, and—as it appeared that she had done—actually placed herself to some extent in his hands. He implored her at least to take no further step without letting her father know what she

was about ; after which he went on to dilate at some length upon the uncongenial surroundings which no actress could avoid, the impossibility of any unknown lady, however talented, stepping at once into a leading part, and so forth. He wound up by declaring that he was sure (not that he was !) Nora would pardon the liberty he was taking, that she would give him credit for honest and friendly motives, and that he was always most truly hers.

This ingeniously foolish missive—which, to do him justice, he himself perceived to be rather foolish—he hastily popped into an envelope, whereto he affixed a seal and a postage-stamp. For some occult reason one seldom tears up a stamped and sealed letter, and perhaps he wanted to take measures of precaution against the sobering influences of a night's rest.

CHAPTER XV

A PRELIMINARY CANTER

THAT in return for his sage advice he would be advised, politely or rudely, by letter to mind his own business was only what Wilfrid felt, upon reflection, that he must expect. He had, no doubt, taken a liberty, and could not fairly complain of being snubbed for his pains; but such treatment he was prepared to accept, provided only that he achieved his purpose of giving Nora pause. What, however, he was not, oddly enough, prepared for was that most chilling and effective of all snubs which is administered by absolute silence, and it must be owned that he was a sore and angry man when it became evident that Miss Power did not mean to honor him with any reply, good, bad, or indifferent. Nor did he again meet Lord Southfield, as he was somewhat irritably and foolishly anxious to do.

“My brother,” Lady Virginia said, in response to tentative inquiries, “isn’t much of a London man; and even when he is in London, he prefers to associate with impossible people. I don’t suppose we shall see any more of him, and I’m sure I don’t know what has become of him. Are you afraid that he has flown back to the feet of your Kathleen Mavour-

neen? You needn't be afraid; he is like the sailor who had a wife in every port, and it must be somebody else's turn to dispose of him now."

"I am sure," Wilfrid returned, a little resentfully, "that my Kathleen Mavourneen, as you call her, can have no wish to dispose of him. She isn't an impossible person."

"Then she doesn't resemble you; for you have moments, I am sorry to say, which make me doubt your possibility. I mean, of course, as a parliamentary candidate."

But she had really no valid excuse for doubting him in that capacity. It had now been formally arranged that he was to solicit the electors' suffrages in the newly constituted Heckingley division—Mr. Jessop having announced his intention of withdrawing from public life—and he was ready, he said, to obey the orders of his chiefs, some of whom seemed ready, on their side, to gratify the aspirations of the extreme Radical wing. The Parliament of 1890—that Parliament of large promises and small performances—was at its last gasp, as also was the sway of the vast, stolid middle class, which for close upon half a century had dictated the policy of this empire.

"And a good thing, too!" Lady Virginia declared. "A despotism isn't a bad form of government, though I think a republic is better; but no self-respecting person ought to be asked to place his neck under the splay feet of the *bourgeoisie*. Henceforth we are going to be a pure democracy, and those who want to come to the front will have to prove themselves pure democrats. Bear that in mind, please."

Wilfrid promised to bear it in mind. He was in all sincerity a democrat to the extent of being opposed to all class privileges, and, as regarded the question which chiefly preoccupied his instructress, he was inclined to be with her—certain reservations apart. Hers was, at all events, a generous point of view. The only difficulty was how to share it and at the same time denounce the Tories, who were governing Ireland without exceptional legislation and in apparent concert with Irish representatives. He mentioned this little difficulty to her ladyship, who assured him that it would cease to exist long before the general election.

“Whatever it may suit them to pretend for the moment, they are slave-drivers at heart,” she averred, “and they daren’t offer much—nothing like as much as we shall end by offering. The thing for you to do, when you talk to your future constituents, will be to take time by the forelock and say outright that you are in favor of Home Rule.”

“That would be going a little beyond my instructions,” Wilfrid observed.

“Well, why shouldn’t you make yourself famous by going beyond your instructions? I rather want you to be famous, you know.”

“From the moment that you want anything, you are pretty sure to get it,” said Wilfrid. “Personally, I am not ambitious; but if fame is to be obtained, and if you can be pleased upon such comparatively easy terms, who am I to lay back my ears? I will try to be as preposterous as you will doubtless order me to be.”

Lady Virginia remarked that that was both pretty

and sensible of him. He was, in truth, anxious to please her and flattered by the interest that she expressed in his future career. After the slap in the face which he had received from one quarter, it was but natural that he should be especially amenable to cajolery proceeding from another. He accordingly required no pressing to make Heckingley House his headquarters during the preliminary canter prescribed for him, and if, at certain meetings which followed, he said any preposterous things, he had the consolation of knowing that the intellectual calibre of his audience rendered his utterances quite unimportant. All he had to do—so the partially convalescent Mr. Jessop, who was kind enough to assist his candidature, informed him—was to proclaim his adherence to every plank in the Radical platform, and to talk vaguely about the nationalization of the land.

His bucolic auditors listened to him with dull patience and obvious lack of interest, seldom applauding, and usually winding up the proceedings with “Three cheers for the Grand Old Man!” He was not called upon to say much about Ireland, nor did it matter in the least what his views with regard to foreign policy might be. His opponent, Mr. Mildmay, was a pleasant-mannered country gentleman, who was rather languidly fighting a losing battle because nobody else would undertake the expense, and who was upon the best of terms with his friend and neighbor, Lady Virginia; there was evidently going to be no trouble at all about the forthcoming contest.

It did not, perhaps, follow that no troubles would

result from his acquiescence in the wishes and commands of a lady who, as he had truly remarked, generally managed to get what she wanted. What, he sometimes wondered, did she really want him to do beyond ultimately voting in the House of Commons with the party to which he belonged? A touch of perverse naughtiness prompted him, one evening, to put this query to Lady Laura, who seemed to be much amused by it.

“What more than that,” she returned, “*can* Virginia want of you? It’s impossible to guess! But of course, as you say, she must want something, or she wouldn’t make as much of you as she does. Is it, do you think, that she wishes to make some small return to you for your blind adoration of her?”

“Blind adoration!” echoed Wilfrid, a little startled. “You put the case rather strongly.”

“Do I? Then suppose we call it respectful admiration. Virginia is accustomed to arousing both sentiments, and it’s only fair to her to admit that she always tries to reward them to the best of her powers. But what particular reward she has in store for you, except hospitality and the gift of this seat in Parliament, which you would probably rather be without, I don’t at present quite see.”

Yet she must surely have seen what was so patent! She had, indeed, virtually intimated long ere this that she was aware of the intentions of her relatives, and that she did not mind, for the sake of peace, lending some apparent encouragement to designs which were destined to come to nothing. If she had not meant to intimate that—but the alternative de-

manded closer scrutiny than there was time to bestow upon it.

“Are you,” Wilfrid hastily and bluntly inquired, “accusing me of having fallen in love with your sister?”

“Oh no,” was the girl’s calm reply. “You couldn’t, I am sure, fall in love with anybody if you tried, and you certainly won’t be so unwise as to try. But you will hardly, I should think, go so far as to pretend that you are here now for anything or anybody but Virginia.”

“Of course,” answered Wilfrid, “it wouldn’t have occurred to me to stand for this particular constituency if I hadn’t been promised Lady Virginia’s support. Why do you say I am incapable of falling in love? Am I so abnormal?”

Lady Laura shrugged her shoulders lazily.

“That sort of incapacity isn’t a bit abnormal,” she declared. “I rather think—though I can’t be quite sure—that I suffer from it myself. Everybody has fancies. I may have a fancy for—for whom shall I say?—for some Tom, Dick, or Harry. But falling in love implies an amount of wear and tear which only heroic persons can be expected to face. And you aren’t exactly a hero, are you?”

This to a man who had not only been foolish enough to fall desperately in love with a girl who could not even be at the pains of answering his letters, but heroic enough to efface himself, lest peradventure she should be driven by force of circumstances to entertain his unwelcome suit! But Wilfrid did not protest; he only ventured to remark that if his merits were small, so were his pretensions.

“Shake hands,” said Lady Laura; “we’re in the same boat. My merits also are small; but then I never said they weren’t. That, I trust, will be taken into consideration by my friends if I ever do anything to startle or horrify them.”

“You won’t,” answered Wilfrid, who felt that the young lady deserved some return for her candor. “You will never take the trouble.”

But what she had said so far stuck in his memory as to make him wonder more than once what her meaning had been. It was perhaps in her to commit some act of surprising folly; there was really no saying what might or might not be in a person at once so reticent and so outspoken. And then a possibility—a remote one, no doubt, but still just a possibility—suggested itself to him which caused him first to blush ingenuously and then to whistle. Her remarks about his admiration for her sister, her rather unkind assertion that he was no hero, the slightly disdainful fashion in which he sometimes caught her scrutinizing him from between half-closed eyelids—did not these things reveal a certain animosity, to be accounted for upon a very ordinary hypothesis?

Wilfrid Elles was not in the least a vain man, and for that very reason it came quite naturally to him to perceive that he was as likely as another to touch some maiden’s heart. If he had won what he had not sought, while losing what he would have given his ears to gain, that would be only in accordance with the general perversity of things. Or rather, upon second thoughts, it might be a matter for congratulation. Lady Laura was charming; his inexorable common-sense forbade him to believe that

because he had been crossed in love he would remain single all his days; why not acquiesce at once in what would have to be accepted sooner or later? If an unworthy desire to prove to Miss Nora that her contemptuous view of him was not, after all, the universal one counted for something in this philosophic summing up of the situation, it is only fair to him to add that he was unconscious of being so influenced.

For the rest, Lady Virginia kept him so busy with public affairs, during the ensuing period, that he was able, without much effort, to avert his gaze from private and domestic contingencies. Those were days of irresolution and uncertainty in the Liberal camp, days of waiting for a *mot d'ordre* which did not come, and of rumors which caused many a wavering politician to postpone as long as might be the possibly awkward duty of addressing his constituents. To some of these the speech of a former Irish Chief Secretary at Bradford doubtless came as an encouragement and a relief. Mr. Forster, at all events, knew what programme he was prepared to advocate and support, and stated it with characteristic lucidity. No empirical tinkering with the Land Laws, no Disestablishment just at present; above all, no agreement in the existing policy of governing Ireland without a Crimes Act. "The non-renewal of the Crimes Act means this: if anybody wishes to commit any agrarian offence, any outrage or murder, it would be almost impossible to convict. No jury would convict the culprit. It also means this . . . that, inasmuch as the government, with their eyes open, have allowed the provisions against boy-

cotting to cease, the people of Ireland will not unnaturally jump to the conclusion that it is not only legal, but permissible."

"And so it is!" declared Lady Virginia, to whom Wilfrid read aloud the above extract from a speech which he admired. "Surely, if I sell butter and eggs, I have a right to say that I don't care to supply this or that family!"

"And if you batter out the brains of this or that family, hasn't the community any right to call you to account?"

"Just as many brains are likely to be battered out with as without a Coercion Act; but some people will always be safe, because they have no brains to lose. What Mr. Forster will lose is his election—and serve him right! Why doesn't he call himself a Tory at once?"

"But it is the Tories who are dispensing with coercion."

"Only because they are snakes in the grass and wolves in sheep's clothing. Give them a big majority and you will very soon see what their notions of conciliation are. But they won't get a majority, big or small. The important thing is that ours should be big—really big, I mean."

"Lest we should be tempted to imitate our opponents?"

Lady Virginia laughed.

"Every now and then," she observed, surveying him, with her head a little on one side, "you bring out a rather sharp remark. I don't mean to say that you do it on purpose. Now we'll play lawn-tennis."

She played that game with remarkable grace and

agility, almost always beating her adversary, who perhaps did not very much mind being beaten. It was, at any rate, pleasanter and more healthy to be defeated in that way than by arguments which did not invariably bring conviction home to him.

CHAPTER XVI

SIR SAMUEL ASSISTS

LADY VIRGINIA (for it was on her account that they were ordered, though her husband doubtless paid the bill) received a huge supply of newspapers every day ; so that the diligent student of the jumping cat had every opportunity, while under her roof, of prosecuting useful researches. But newspapers of all shades of political opinion were evidently a little puzzled as to what line their leading articles ought to take until Mr. Parnell, speaking at Dublin on the 24th of August, announced in so many words that what he and his colleagues aimed at, and looked forward to obtaining, was “the restoration of our own Parliament.” As he went on to explain that the restored Parliament must have complete legislative independence, that cleared the air, and enabled journalists to cry aloud that the Irish leader could not have what he demanded—which they did with pleasing unanimity.

“You see !” remarked Wilfrid to his monitress. “The moment that the thing is put before them in black and white, Tories, Whigs, and Radicals agree that it shall never be forced down their throats. We aren’t going to give legislative independence—which is another name for separation—to Ireland ; and

eighty or a hundred Irish members won't be able to outvote us."

"Oh yes, they will," answered Lady Virginia, tranquilly; "they will be able, by choosing their moment, to turn out any government; and as they know their strength, they are quite right to proclaim it. You, I am afraid, are at heart an opportunist; you would like to try whether something couldn't be done by means of compromises and half-measures; you don't realize that the time has gone by for that sort of thing."

"I should like," Wilfrid declared, "to see the whole question placed beyond and above party squabbles. I should like the leaders on both sides to agree definitely as to what we, as a nation, can do, and what we can't, towards meeting the Irish."

"Charming!—but altogether impossible. I don't care twopence what the newspapers say; it stands to reason that eventually one side must be for Home Rule and the other against it: so I am rejoiced that Mr. Parnell has put his foot down. After this the Tories must throw him overboard."

"And do you really think that we are likely to throw him a life-buoy?"

She nodded.

"All in good time," she replied. "Some of us may require a little educating; but that will come. The Irish demands are so fair, so reasonable, so palpably just, that twenty or thirty years hence people will hardly be able to understand why we made such a prodigious fuss about conceding them."

"I envy you!" said Wilfrid, with an admiring sigh. "I wish I could feel as you do!"

“Nothing is more simple; you have only to ask yourself how you would feel if you were an Irishman.”

“Ulster is in Ireland.”

“And Ulster will be represented in the Irish Parliament. Of course, there must always be a few malecontents everywhere; but the educational process will go on in Ulster, too.”

Meanwhile, it did not appear that there was any immediate prospect of the Liberal party being educated in accordance with Lady Virginia's views. Lord Hartington, addressing his constituents a few days after Mr. Parnell's Dublin speech, repudiated the idea that any party in the country would ever consent to acquire or retain office by making terms with the Separatists; to which the Irish leader lost no time in responding: “I believe that if it be sought to make it impossible for our country to obtain the right to administer her own affairs, we shall make all other things impossible for those who strive to bring that about.”

“He will only put our backs up and make us lay our ears down by such threats,” Wilfrid observed.

But Lady Virginia declared that it was not a threat at all—merely the statement of a fact. “Besides,” she added, “what is said at the present moment doesn't count for much. Wait until after the elections.”

“Oh, I'm in no hurry,” answered the prospective member for the Heckingley division.

Indeed, he was very willing to wait as long as anybody wished, and to maintain the detached attitude which was most congenial to him until he

should be forced to abandon it. But Sir Samuel Bland, who, with his daughter, arrived at this juncture to join Lady Virginia's guests, assured Mr. Elles that an open mind with regard to questions of urgency would never do. The Liberal party, Sir Samuel regretted to say, was divided into two sections. There were the Whigs, whose recent utterances he deplored, and who would end, he feared, by drifting into the opposite camp; and there were the Radicals, whose programme was definite, beneficent, and dictated alike by the needs and the behests of the people. If he was to speak at one of Mr. Elles's meetings, as he had been requested to do, he really must assume that the candidate accepted that programme in its entirety.

"Oh, I've swallowed it," Wilfrid replied. "I don't say that I haven't found some of the items a little indigestible; still, for all practical purposes, I may be said to have assimilated them. But as for Home Rule—"

"Ah, Home Rule!" interrupted Sir Samuel, lifting up a pair of large, deprecating white hands—"all depends upon what is understood by Home Rule. Upon that point it is not necessary, or even possible, to be quite definite as yet."

"Lady Virginia is," Wilfrid replied.

"Ah, dear Lady Virginia! But then, you see, she is not in Parliament; and that does make a difference, doesn't it?"

Sir Samuel's playful, paternal manner in his relations with Lady Virginia somehow conveyed the impression that he lamented the disparity of years which rendered it appropriate. In private life there

was an indefinable something about him to which fastidious persons were apt to take exception ; but as a platform orator he was really very good indeed, and in that capacity he kindly placed himself at the service of a candidate who could not, in the sequel, refuse him the tribute of genuine admiration.

Sir Samuel's speech at the Heckingley Town Hall was in all respects admirable—so much so that Lady Virginia estimated its worth at a gain of a hundred doubtful votes, more or less. He appeared to perceive at a glance what his hearers would like, and he told them with easy fluency how much he and the Radical wing would like to fulfil their aspirations. Graduated taxation, “free trade in land,” allotments at reasonable rents for the agricultural laborers—all these measures he hoped to see carried in the coming Parliament. Education also must, of course, be made free, and if the people of England should desire a State Church to be abolished, their decision would command obedience. He, for one, while yielding to no man in his respect for the clergy as a body, did not believe that the cause of true religion would or could suffer by the establishment of denominational equality.

Over the Irish question he passed lightly ; perhaps he knew that the Heckingley electors took no very profound interest in it. He observed, however, that it was one of extreme intricacy, and he would ask his audience to say whether it was not more likely to be brought to a satisfactory solution by the great statesman who had already conferred such immense benefits upon the sister island than by those whose unvarying opposition was largely responsible for a

condition of affairs which impeded all useful domestic legislation. He concluded by bestowing a benevolent blessing upon Wilfrid, "the nephew of my old friend Sir John Elles, whose services to his country and our party will be fresh in the memory of you all." It was impossible to refuse applause to a millionaire who asked nothing better than to be additionally taxed, and whose heart so evidently beat in unison with that of his humbler fellow-subjects.

But Mr. Lethbridge, who, notwithstanding his Conservative principles, was present on the occasion, had no plaudits to bestow upon the speaker.

"The oleaginous old humbug," he whispered to Wilfrid, "hasn't even the merit of being amusing. Now, Virginia, say what you will of her, *is* amusing."

"She is sincere," Wilfrid answered.

"Exactly so; that's the funny part of it. What, after all, could be more amusing than that Virginia should be a sincere Radical? As for that elderly windbag, we could buy him with a peerage to-morrow if he were worth the price."

That was doubtless an outrageous calumny; still, Wilfrid, while ready to give Sir Samuel credit for being an able, and possibly honest, politician, could not for the life of him understand why the man should be considered socially attractive, and both Lady Virginia and Lady Laura appeared to find him so. The latter, after sitting in a corner with him during an entire evening, was subsequently requested, not without a touch of asperity, to explain her conduct.

"What in the world do you see in him—you who are bored by almost everybody?" Wilfrid asked.

“He is old and fat and vulgar ; I am not sure that he isn’t impertinent into the bargain—or inclined to be.”

“He is all that,” Lady Laura placidly agreed ; “but there is this to be said for him, that he isn’t his daughter. If I hadn’t monopolized him—he loves to be monopolized in that way—the daughter would very likely have been thrown upon my hands.”

“Miss Bland is a plain-headed young woman,” remarked Wilfrid, glancing across the room at the sofa upon which the lady in question, who certainly corresponded to that description, was sitting bolt upright ; “but I should have said that she was quite harmless.”

“Well, no ; I don’t call her harmless. It isn’t her fault that she has little beady eyes and a red nose ; perhaps it isn’t altogether her fault that she has such an exasperating giggle when she talks ; but she represents such disagreeable things that one can’t bring an unprejudiced judgment to bear upon her.”

“How do you mean ?”

“Hasn’t Virginia told you that she is destined to be our sister-in-law ? I thought you were in all Virginia’s secrets.”

“No, indeed !” exclaimed Wilfrid, much surprised. “Is it possible that Lord Southfield can be engaged to be married to—to—”

“To that fright, were you going to say ? There’s nothing impossible in his being engaged to Miss Bland ; but it isn’t actually the case yet. As Virginia hasn’t taken you into her confidence, perhaps you won’t tell her that I mentioned the subject ; but

she has quite made up her mind about it. Southfield, I believe, really must marry some rich woman, and, after all—”

Lady Laura shrugged her beautiful bare shoulders and made a grimace.

“Has Lord Southfield made up his mind about it?”

“I think not; but he will end by doing as he is told. Everybody ends by obeying Virginia’s orders. Even I—*moi qui vous parle*—can’t resist her; though I have always had the reputation of being exceptionally obstinate.”

“I sincerely hope that you will prove worthy of your reputation if you are ever ordered to espouse a male Miss Bland,” said Wilfrid.

“Thanks. But I don’t expect I shall. I told you the other day, you may remember, that I might startle and horrify my friends some fine morning.”

“I didn’t understand that you thought of startling us in that way.”

“You took it for granted that I alluded to the opposite way? No; I must leave that to you. I shouldn’t have the gumption, even if I were offered the opportunity, which won’t be offered to me. The wisest plan is not to care a straw what may happen; and really, now that I come to think of it, I don’t particularly care.”

A break in her voice belied her words, and Wilfrid, looking up, received a sudden shock at the discovery that her eyes were swimming in tears.

“Lady Laura,” he exclaimed, upon the impulse of the moment, “I wish you wouldn’t mind telling me what is the matter.”

The effect of this appeal was to make her burst out laughing.

“I can do that without the least difficulty,” she replied. “The matter is simply that Southfield and I aren’t rich enough to please ourselves. Consequently, I suppose we shall have to please other people. It will be all the same a hundred years hence, if not sooner.”

She moved away, leaving her interlocutor pensive and puzzled. Upon the whole he was disposed to revert to his original theory, which had been temporarily disturbed, and to assume that Lady Laura had lost her heart to some hopeless detrimental; and that led him once more to the question of whether she might not learn to regard him, as he already almost regarded her, in the light of a very tolerable second best. Since she was bound to marry, and since he clearly foresaw that he must sooner or later do the same, would not the reasons which they had for mutual sympathy and forbearance form a fair enough basis for matrimonial contentment? A firmer basis, at any rate, than if one of them, by ill-luck, had chanced to be enamoured of the other?

But the question, unlike that of his political creed, did not press for an immediate answer. He laid it aside, in order to rub his hands metaphorically over the prospect of seeing poor Lord Southfield lead snub-nosed little Miss Bland to the altar. Lord Southfield, to be sure, was not the man to allow his *menus plaisirs* to be interfered with by such an incidental change in his condition; but, then, Nora Power was assuredly not the girl to let a married man make love to her. Miss Bland, therefore, might be wished

every success in her presumable ambition to wear a countess's coronet.

An invitation to a shooting-lodge in the Highlands, which arrived by the next morning's post, seemed to Wilfrid to have come just in the nick of time. He asked Lady Virginia whether she thought he might take a holiday, and she replied, after consideration, that she saw no reason why he shouldn't.

"Of course you will come back to us when the real campaign opens, but for the present I dare say the electors have seen enough of you. Did you say that it was to Aberdeenshire that you were going? It is just possible that you may come across my brother there. If you do, turn him out of the country; *kick* him out. I want him most particularly to stay with us now, and to-day he writes to say he can't manage it."

Her ladyship seemed to be a good deal put out, and Wilfrid waited explanations, but all she added was :

"You may tell him from me that if he won't come when he is called he will be sorry for it."

"You will always find me ready to come when I am called," Wilfrid remarked.

She laughed.

"Ah—I wonder! But nobody is calling you just now, so you may run away and play."

CHAPTER XVII

FOREST AND MOOR

To be a healthy young man out in the free air of a heathery Scottish hillside, and to have just seen a royal stag drop to your shot at a distance of something like a hundred yards, is to be a very happy young man, no matter what cares you may have dismissed and be destined shortly to resume. There is perhaps nothing better in this unsatisfying world than to be such a young man in such a situation; and Wilfrid Elles, who was wealthy, in addition to being healthy, had wisdom enough to realize this. He said to himself that he would certainly rent a deer forest next year (an incidental acknowledgment of the consolations of wealth); he also said to himself that life, after all, has moments good enough to make up for many bad ones, and to the stalker he remarked aloud, with modest exultation, "Well, I'm glad I didn't miss him."

Given a fair chance, he was not very likely to miss, being tolerably expert in the use of a rifle; still, it had been a pretty shot, and the stag was a magnificent one, and he was entitled to the triumph which he had earned by long and hard labor. So, while the gralloching process was going on, he sat down upon the heather and smoked a pipe and was glad.

In these wild, wide, fresh solitudes, how far he was from the ignoble strife of party warfare! How far from petty social worries! How far even (for he had the courage to be quite honest in his self-communings) from the gnawing pangs of love-sickness!

It may be thought that a lover capable of thus joyously musing could not really have been very much in love; but some allowance must be made for a man who, after consciously spending many months in the wrong place, suddenly finds himself in the right one. To Wilfrid, sport, and especially sport of this kind, was the supreme pleasure of existence; he was aware of excelling in it, and not less aware that he would never conspicuously excel in any other pursuit. Moreover, he was under no illusion with regard to Nora Power; he had not the faintest hope of winning her love, and he believed that the very best thing he could do would be to cure himself of his own—should that prove to be within the compass of his ability.

He had now been for more than a fortnight the guest of his friend Graham, a well-to-do, middle-aged bachelor, in whose company he had laid low more than one tiger, and the four remaining members of the party were men with whom he found himself in complete sympathy—men who cared a great deal for sport and very little indeed about politics. They were, almost as a matter of course, Conservatives, but they were by no means aggressively so, nor, beyond some occasional, good-humored chaff, addressed to the Radical candidate for the Heckingley division, did they touch upon topics which they were ill-equipped to discuss. However, when Wilfrid re-

turned, towards sunset, to Mr. Graham's rambling, one-storied shooting-lodge, he found his companions, who had been out grouse-shooting, busy with a freshly arrived batch of newspapers, and one of them remarked :

“Now you'll be happy, Elles ; for your distinguished leader has issued his manifesto at last. I suppose you and the electors of Midlothian will understand what he means by it, though I'll be shot if a simple creature like myself can make head or tail of the thing.”

“That's exactly what he does mean, and what he always means,” put in Mr. Graham. “It's essential that the average individual should be unable to make head or tail of his utterances. Your vote is what he wants, not your comprehension.”

Wilfrid, conscious of being an average individual, devoted himself, with a sigh, to the study of a document which, to tell the truth, was not too easy of comprehension. “*Il faut qu'une porte soit ouverte ou fermée,*” says the French proverb ; but perhaps that necessity was unlikely to be recognized by the head of a notoriously divided party, and certainly Mr. Gladstone's lengthy address to his constituents seemed to leave a considerable number of doors ajar. That he should be precise with regard to foreign policy, Parliamentary procedure, land-law reform, and the possible disestablishment of the Church of England was not demanded of him by one of his humble followers : Wilfrid, as he had told Sir Samuel Bland, had gulped down the Radical programme upon these points, and considered himself fully committed thereto. But it did seem desirable that the

finger of authority should point towards some specific and clear line of conduct in relation to Irish affairs, and it was upon this portion of the manifesto that the attention of the reader naturally concentrated itself. Nothing, it appeared to him, could be more distinct or more decisive.

“To maintain the supremacy of the Crown, the unity of the Empire, and all the authority of Parliament necessary for the conservation of that unity,” wrote Mr. Gladstone, “is the first duty of every representative of the people.” He added, to be sure, that, “subject to this governing principle, every grant to portions of the country of enlarged powers for the management of their own affairs is, in my view, not a source of danger, but a means of averting it.” But this could hardly be construed as implying any sanction of Home Rule. It looked as though Lady Virginia had made a little mistake, and as though the integrity of the British Empire might safely continue to be upheld on any platform.

“But really,” said Wilfrid, in reply to certain queries which awaited him after he had ascertained that the *Times* considered Mr. Gladstone’s deliverance “dispiriting,” while the *Standard* thought it “weak, disappointing, and vague,” and the *Daily Telegraph* deemed it “eminently moderate and judicious,” “one doesn’t come to the Highlands to be bothered with public affairs. In due season all you fellows will chuck brickbats at my head or look the other way when we meet, I dare say. Let us be friends as long as we can, and forget that one of us, for his sins, is in imminent danger of becoming an M.P.”

“My dear boy,” good-natured Mr. Graham re-

turned, "you're welcome to be a Socialist, or a Republican, or an Anarchist, or what you please. You are like your clever little friend, Lady Virginia Lethbridge; it's safe for you to commit yourself to any set of monstrous doctrines, because the people who know you will never be persuaded to quarrel with you. Oh, and that reminds me that Lady Virginia's brother is coming here. I had a letter from him just now—he can spare us a few days, he says. Did you ever see Southfield shoot? Well, its worth seeing, I can tell you; and now that the birds are getting rather wild, he'll have a chance of showing you what he can do."

It is always a pleasure to look on at brilliant shooting; but, quite independently of that promised treat, Wilfrid was glad to hear that Lord Southfield was expected. There were one or two points upon which he might reasonably expect to obtain some enlightenment from this visit, and although Miss Power had seen fit to treat him with marked discourtesy, that did not, of course, prevent him from continuing to be a sincere and disinterested well-wisher of hers.

But when, on the following afternoon, the additional guest arrived, looking as impassive and impenetrable as was his wont, and having very little to say to anybody, no immediate occasion presented itself for the delivery of Lady Virginia's message. Lord Southfield recognized and greeted Wilfrid with some approach to friendliness; but he had the air—that invaluable air which some men manage to acquire without giving offence—of not wanting to be bothered; and to be put in mind of a neglected engagement would, it might be presumed, bother him.

Only late in the evening, when dinner had been disposed of and cigars and pipes had been lighted, he approached the subject of his own accord by saying :

“ You were at Heckingley the other day, weren't you, Mr. Elles ? ”

“ I left about a fortnight ago, ” Wilfrid replied. “ Your sister, I believe, was in hopes of seeing you just then. At least, she told me, in case I came across you in Scotland, to say rather emphatically that she was. ”

“ So she has been writing and telegraphing, ” Lord Southfield placidly remarked. “ Very unreasonable of her ; but you may have noticed that Virginia is an unreasonable woman. I haven't taken any notice of her despatches ; with women no excuse pays so well as holding your tongue. It's easily done, too, when you have the luck to be a few hundred miles beyond their reach. ”

After smoking in silence for a few minutes he resumed :

“ You had old Bland there, hadn't you ? Plausible sort of old miscreant, Bland. If I had half his income, I could find some better use for my time than to run about the country making inflammatory speeches ; but there's no accounting for tastes. ”

“ I left Sir Samuel and his daughter at Heckingley, ” Wilfrid said. “ They were to stay some little time longer, I understood. ”

But if he thought that the mention of Miss Bland would cause Lord Southfield to move a muscle, he was disappointed. The latter, after a pause, merely went on to remark :

“ Old Bland was helping you to humbug the

Heckingley electors, I suppose ; he's rather good at that sort of thing, they tell me. Not that you needed his help ; for I believe Virginia holds that division in the hollow of her hand. I'm not a politician myself," Lord Southfield added, " so it strikes me as rather funny that a good sportsman who can afford to treat himself to good sport should want to be in the House of Commons ; still, as that is your wish, you have done well to take Virginia's side. My experience is that Virginia's is always bound to be the winning side."

This gave rise to protests from sundry other members of the company, who could not admit that the triumph of Radicalism was assured, and thus the conversation took a turn unfavorable for the eliciting of discoveries upon which Wilfrid was bent.

Nor was he more fortunate on the morrow, when a long day on the moors gave him ample opportunity to satisfy himself that Lord Southfield's skill had not been exaggerated, but afforded him no chance of inquiring whether anything more had been done with regard to the lease of Rathfinnan Abbey. On the other hand, his own excellent shooting secured for him the esteem, not to say the affection, of one who was accustomed to measure all men by the rank to which they were entitled in the aristocracy of sport, and on the way home Lord Southfield, who had become quite amiable and confidential, took him by the elbow to say :

" Now, I'll tell you what it is, Elles ; you must come over and stay with me in the South of Ireland next winter. From all I hear, the pheasant shooting isn't worth the trouble ; but in the average season

we ought to get some good days with snipe and cock."

"You have taken the place, then?" said Wilfrid.

"Oh, yes; I've taken it. Got it a bargain, too, I believe, thanks to your Home Rule friends. Poor old Power seems as pleased as Punch to be out of it—and he has caved in to his daughter. She is to have her own way about the theatre."

Wilfrid's heart sank.

"What theatre?" was his next inquiry.

"Ah, that I can't tell you yet. The St. Martin's, most likely; but it will have to depend upon how I can work things when I go up to London."

So Lord Southfield was going to "work things," and, in defiance of the friendly warning addressed to her, Nora, it appeared, had placed herself in his hands! This was anything but welcome news, and Wilfrid was conscious that his voice was not altogether under control, as he asked:

"Is it so certain that you will be able to secure a lucrative theatrical engagement for an utterly unknown and untried young lady?"

Lord Southfield thought that it was.

"I don't know about what you would call a lucrative part to start with; but she'll come to the front like a shot. She did a little bit of acting for my benefit the last time I was there—"

"Oh, you have been there this summer, then?"

"Yes; and I saw at once that she had only to go in and win. She is—" Lord Southfield paused for a moment, and then added, in accents of admiring conviction, "She's a ripper!"

A ripper! But of course all this was none of Wil-

frid Elles's business, and if Miss Power preferred to make intimate friends of men who could find no more fitting description than that to give her, she must be allowed to go her own way. All the same, it did seem rather surprising that she should be allowed by her father to go her own way, and Wilfrid, after silently plodding along for some distance, could not refrain from remarking :

“I should hardly have expected Mr. Power to give his consent so readily. I certainly shouldn't have given mine, if I had been he.”

“Well, he didn't give it very readily,” Lord Southfield confessed. “In fact, he was in a thundering rage at first. But I believe he consulted some of his friends, and they advised him not to make an ass of himself.”

“I wish,” Wilfrid involuntarily ejaculated, “he had consulted me !”

This seemed to amuse his companion, who laughed and answered :

“Oh, he wouldn't be very likely to do that. You aren't at all in favor with the old gentleman, I can tell you. One can't very well combine Virginia's favor with the favor of Irish landlords, and he has heard whose disciple you are. He says he can stand Radicals at a pinch, but he'll be hanged if he is going to shake hands with avowed traitors and rebels. So, if I were you, I wouldn't stir him up in his West Kensington lair.”

That only had been wanting ! To have incurred Mr. Power's displeasure at the very moment when Lord Southfield appeared to have rendered himself a *persona gratissima* in that quarter was, of course,

equivalent to hopeless and conclusive defeat. Wilfrid said no more, having nothing more to say; but his heart was full of wrath and bitterness. He foresaw what was coming—foresaw even a good deal which was not at all sure to come—and he made up his mind to endure a state of things which he was patently powerless to cure. He did not tell himself in so many words that he would forthwith propose to Lady Laura Mayne; but he did recognize that such must be the logical, inevitable outcome of his mental survey.

On the following morning Lord Southfield, summoned to other shooting-quarters, took his leave, and as he was driven away from the door Mr. Graham remarked:

“That fellow is a fine shot and pleasant enough company. It’s a pity that he hasn’t the vestige of a conscience where women are concerned. Sir Samuel Bland is making overtures to Southfield on his daughter’s behalf, they tell me. I wish the silly old fool joy of his future son-in-law!”

CHAPTER XVIII

THE VERDICT OF HODGE.

LADY VIRGINIA LETHBRIDGE was wont to speak in somewhat opprobrious terms of hunting and shooting men. Not, she would explain, that there was anything to be said against them during close time ; on the contrary, they were then, taking them all round, perhaps the best class of men in existence. But while engaged in their favorite pursuits they ceased, according to her, to be of the slightest use for social purposes. Their conversation resolved itself into endless recitals of their own performances, which were frequently mendacious and always uninteresting ; they were apt to drop asleep immediately after dinner, and became, generally, such unconscionable bores that there was no living in the house with them.

Her ladyship, therefore, made it a rule to turn her back upon Heckingley as soon as the trees began to grow bare, leaving her husband to entertain bachelor parties at his ease. In the particular year with which this narrative is concerned she proposed, it is true, to return home before the end of November, reasons of state rendering that act of self-sacrifice imperative upon her ; but until the electoral campaign should open in earnest she felt entitled to grant herself

leave of absence, and she was graciously pleased to intimate by letter to Wilfrid Elles that a similar privilege might, in her opinion, be claimed by the future member for the division.

She added in a postscript—whether with intentional significance or not her correspondent could not tell—“Laura and I are going to disport ourselves at Brighton. It isn't a particularly nice place; but, after all, one generally comes across somebody whom one knows there, and 'abroad' is hardly worth the trouble of the journey for these few weeks.”

The missive brought a sense of relief to its recipient, who did not want to resume the labor of speech-making any sooner than he could help, and who was in the frame of mind to welcome any plan that presented itself under the guise of a postponement. He did not, therefore, betake himself to Brighton, but spent his autumn, not unpleasantly, in Scotland and England with various friends who were glad enough to have the assistance of so trustworthy a shot.

But, although it was holiday time, he could not, of course, consistently with his duty to the Heckingley electors and the country and himself, neglect to keep a watchful eye upon political developments or to peruse attentively the orations reported in the newspapers. Of these the most important—not to say the only important ones—were, in the early part of November, poured forth abundantly by his eminent leader for the instruction of Midlothian audiences. Possibly some members of those audiences did not receive therefrom quite such categorical instruction as they could have wished, but to Wilfrid cer-

tain points seemed to be clearly established by them.

What, for example, could be more decisive than Mr. Gladstone's first words in Edinburgh, when, after deprecating divisions in the Liberal camp and declaring that the party ought to obtain such a majority as would suffice to insure its independence in dealing with the Irish question, he went on to hope that not a single representative would be returned to Parliament who for one moment would listen to any proposition tending to impair the visible and sensible empire? "Whatever demands may be made on the part of Ireland, if they are to be entertained, they must be subject to the condition that the unity of the empire shall be preserved." After that, how could any respectful and obedient follower of his chief venture to proclaim himself an advocate of Home Rule?

Yet, since these introductory observations were wound up by hints which the Irish National party took as intended to be conciliatory, it seemed for a time as if Mr. Parnell's adherents would in the next Parliament range themselves on the side of the Opposition. Not until Mr. Gladstone next addressed his constituents at West Calder, on which occasion he ridiculed the invitation conveyed to him by Mr. Parnell that he should show his hand and state plainly what he was prepared to offer to Ireland, was open war declared upon him by those for whose support he had appeared to make a tentative bid. Until Ireland had returned her members, Mr. Gladstone remarked, nobody could know for certain what her wishes were. Moreover, not being in office, he must decline to usurp the functions of the responsible

Ministry, which (perhaps because Ministers did not want to lose the Irish vote) remained impenetrably silent.

Then, as Wilfrid's entertainer at the time remarked, he "caught it hot and strong." The Council of the Irish Nationalists at once issued a manifesto calling upon their fellow-countrymen in England to vote everywhere against "the men who coerced Ireland, deluged Egypt with blood, menace religious liberty in the school, the freedom of speech in Parliament, and promise to the country generally a repetition of the crimes and follies of the last Liberal Administration."

This was followed by a fierce denunciation of the Liberal party, which Wilfrid's host, who was a country gentleman of Conservative convictions, read aloud with a good deal of quiet satisfaction.

"Your friends," he observed, "are not over and above civil to you."

"They are rather more your friends than ours just now, aren't they?" returned Wilfrid. "At all events, you can't refuse Mr. Gladstone credit for courage and honesty in dealing with them."

The other shrugged his shoulders.

"Oh, well, I suppose he has balanced one consideration against another, and now he has declared to win with three acres and a cow. I don't myself believe that he will win; but we shall soon see."

Wilfrid, if he had told the whole truth, would have had to acknowledge that he did not greatly care whether Mr. Gladstone won or lost. In politics, as a game, he could not bring himself to feel any interest, nor did it seem to him that, except as regarded Ireland, there was urgent need for fresh legislation. And the

Irish question, he thought, ought to be treated as an imperial, not as a party one. The leaders on both sides ought to come to an understanding and agree upon some definite, continuous policy, as was done in the conduct of foreign affairs. Neither party could boast of having been successful hitherto in its dealings with the Irish people. Why should not both be patriotic enough to unite in dismissing that particular bone of contention from the range of their future squabbles? There were so many other important grounds of difference which would answer the required purpose of giving A and B alternate periods of office.

But this he was destined to be assured upon competent authority was very great nonsense, besides being dreadfully unpractical. Imperatively summoned to Heckingley House, that he might at once proceed to discharge the task which he had accepted, Wilfrid was hardly allowed to exchange salutations with his hostess before she began priming him with instructions. And she was extremely annoyed to find him so supine.

“It is scarcely possible for you to lose the election,” she remarked; “but if defeat were possible I really think you would contrive to achieve it, with your long face and your lukewarm convictions. Rubbish about Irish affairs not being a party question! I don’t say, and I never have said, that the Tories are incapable of granting Home Rule; my own impression is that they are capable of granting anything for the sake of retaining power. What I do say is that we, who are Radicals, want to push forward all manner of domestic reforms, and that we can’t get on with one of them

while Ireland stands in the way. Therefore Ireland must be moved out of the way, and therefore we must have a big majority. Can you manage to look at things from that point of view?"

"I'll try," answered Wilfrid. "But you seem to imply that we stand very much upon the same footing as the Tories."

"Our motives are superior—which, of course, makes all the difference."

"I doubt whether mine are," said Wilfrid. "I am going in for this thing simply and solely in order to please you. Can that be accounted a superior motive?"

"You might easily have a worse one," the little lady replied, bestowing upon him the smile which his somewhat exaggerated assertion may have been intended to win (for the fact was that Lady Virginia looked irresistibly pretty when she smiled). "But," she continued, "I suppose you must have forgotten telling me that you considered it a sacred duty to your late uncle to enter Parliament in the Radical interest."

"Did I really ever tell you that? Well, if I did, it was only the truth. Still, there are duties which one postpones indefinitely. What is certain is that you alone are responsible for my actual candidature."

"Then," said Lady Virginia, "you owe it to me to pump up some slight show of enthusiasm. You can talk quite fluently and nicely when you choose."

So Wilfrid did his best, during the days that ensued, to be fluent and eloquent, without being compromisingly precise. Honesty compelled him to say, in answer to a direct question addressed to him at

one of his meetings, that he was not yet convinced of the desirability of bestowing a separate Parliament upon Ireland, and for this he was subsequently rated by his patroness, who declared that he had missed a fine opportunity. But in truth it did not much matter what he said. Hodge, it was confidently believed, had been captured, and Mr. Mildmay's perfunctory orations were of a nature to indicate that the orator accepted defeat as a foregone conclusion.

Nevertheless, the results of the borough elections were unexpectedly encouraging to the party actually in power. Even Birmingham, which returned seven Liberals, showed greatly increased Conservative minorities, while Liverpool, Manchester, Leeds, Sheffield, and other large towns chose to be represented wholly or chiefly by Mr. Gladstone's opponents. It seemed evident that the decisive mandate for which that statesman asked was not going to be granted to him. Lady Virginia, however, was far from losing heart.

"We are sweeping Scotland, and we shall sweep the counties," she averred. "That will give us as much as we require, and the boroughs will know better next time."

She was an active and exceedingly popular canvasser; she drove Wilfrid about from village to village and from cottage to cottage, forcing him, so to speak, down the grinning bucolic jaws which were opened wide to swallow any benefits, actual or prospective, that her ladyship might have to offer. Moreover, she was quite indefatigable—her staying powers far exceeding those of the expectant M.P.,

who found all this infinitely more tiring and less amusing than a day's stalking.

One evening he returned, dead beat and somewhat disgusted, to find Lady Laura ensconced upon a sofa in the library, with a tea-table by her side and an open novel in her hand. Lady Laura had frankly avowed from the outset that the issue of this electoral contest was a matter of the most profound indifference to her; she had neither part nor lot in it, and she intimated that it was only welcome to her in so far as that it kept bothering people out of the house all day long and left her to the repose which she loved. Curled up now in a nest of enormous silver-gray plush cushions, and with one foot tucked under her, while the light of a shaded lamp fell upon her splendid ruddy hair, she looked like the personification of exquisite idleness.

"Well," she began, "have you had a good time?"

"How can you ask?" exclaimed Wilfrid, dropping wearily into a chair by her side. "Do you know what would make me jump up and down for joy?"

"I dare say I can guess. The ideal thing would be to be beaten by a short head. Then you would be entitled to boast that you had done your utmost, and you would be at liberty to cut the whole concern for two or three years perhaps."

"You have divined, then, that I should like to cut the whole concern?" said Wilfrid, a little surprised by this evidence of perspicacity.

"You haven't made any great secret of it. All the same, my heart will bleed for you if you are beaten. Virginia never can forgive people who fail. She can forget them, though—and she does."

“I think,” said Wilfrid, after a pause, “you are under some slight misapprehension with regard to—to your sister and myself. I should be very sorry, of course, if Lady Virginia were to be disappointed, after all the trouble which she has so kindly taken on my behalf; but—”

“But you wouldn’t in the least mind being forgotten by her? Oh, I think you would, Mr. Elles; I think you would mind very much indeed! Luckily you are in no danger; even Tom Lethbridge, who is bound to back your opponent, admits that you will win, hands down. But don’t be despondent. Nothing, you know, is to be had for nothing, and though it may be a horrid bore to be in the House of Commons, there are ways, I believe, of contriving to spend a good deal of time out of it. At least, I know several members who always seem to have plenty of leisure.”

“I am not particularly eager to be a member,” Wilfrid thought it necessary to explain; “it isn’t because I wish to shirk my duties; it is because I can’t feel satisfied that party tactics—”

“Oh, don’t!” interrupted Lady Laura, throwing up her hand to stop him. “What is the use of talking like that to me, who have never in my life been able to see the difference between t’other and which? I dare say party tactics are unscrupulous; I am sure they are as dull as they are bewildering. But Virginia’s tactics are always amusing and instructive to watch. I shall end by falling a victim to them. It seems uncertain as yet whether you will or not.”

To what did she allude? He was upon the point of asking her, but thought better of it, and held his

tongue. She was apt to talk a little at random, he suspected, and might have found it difficult to explain exactly what she meant by her own prophecies.

One of these, however, was fulfilled within a few days, when the result of the poll placed him a long way ahead of his antagonist, and inaugurated that succession of county victories for the Liberals which sealed the fate of Lord Salisbury's Ministry.

CHAPTER XIX

RUMORS

“THAT,” remarked Lady Virginia, when she returned in triumph to Heckingley House with the successful candidate, after he had been cheered to the echo by his new constituents, and had addressed them in appropriate words of her own selection, “is what I call beating the enemy pretty handsomely. I am sorry for you, Tom ; but it serves you right for being on the losing side.”

“Thank you, my dear,” answered Mr. Lethbridge, imperturbably ; “but it doesn’t hurt. The political profligacy of your side, supplemented in this particular instance by your own, was certain to deceive the simple rustic mind. Nobody expected anything else. I can afford to wait until the rustic mind discovers that it has been imposed upon and turns you all out at the point of the pitchfork.”

“We aren’t in yet,” said Lady Virginia.

“No ; but you inevitably will be before long ; and it’s scarcely within the bounds of possibility now for you to get a working majority without an Irish alliance,” returned her husband, rubbing his hands. “That’s the beauty of it.”

“Of course, that’s the beauty of it ! Isn’t an Irish alliance the very thing I want ?”

“Oh, I didn't know; I thought you wanted a thumping majority.”

“Well, one or the other,” said her ladyship, laughing good-humoredly; for indeed this independent couple were always good-humored in their mutual relations. “We may be made to look a little less magnanimous than one could wish; but what, after all, do looks matter? I'm sure it isn't for the likes of you Tories to throw stones!”

The member for the Heckingley division held his peace, and secretly hoped that the Tories might retain power, if only on sufferance. After the explicit declarations of Mr. Gladstone and Mr. Parnell, he really did not see how an Irish alliance was to be concluded without humiliation, and the utterances of other prominent Liberals seemed to prove that they would never be consenting parties to such a compact as Mr. Lethbridge and Lady Virginia foreshadowed. Moreover, unimportant though he was, he was a little bit ashamed of the ambiguity of his own utterances. Let a man be ever so insignificant, his vote, one way or the other, still counts as two on a division, and it behooves him (so, at least, this callow legislator thought) at least to be free from personal doubt as to which way it shall go.

The conclusion of the general election, however, and the final returns published, made it evident that the existing Administration must be turned out soon after Parliament met, even if they did not prefer at once to resign office. The people of Great Britain and Ireland having decided to be represented by 249 Conservatives, 335 Liberals, and 86 Home Rulers,

the former could obviously only obtain a majority of one, supposing that they received the support of the latter and that the Speaker was chosen from the Liberal ranks. On the other hand, the Irish members could at any moment defeat the government by a large majority. Lady Virginia said that was all right. Supposing you had set your heart upon the passing of some special measure, wouldn't you wish the people who were known to be in favor of that measure to hold the balance of power? Very well, then—there you were!

“But you assume so much!” sighed Wilfrid. “I haven't, that I am aware of, set my heart upon the passing of any special measure, and that may account in some degree for my not being by any means sure where I am.”

“You are in the Heckingley division, which you represent as a Radical,” he was uncompromisingly informed. “You can't get out of that—and you ought not to be able to get out of the division without leaving hostages of some sort behind you. You ought to seize the first opportunity of purchasing an estate near this.”

Fortunately or unfortunately, there was no neighboring estate in the market then; but there was a smallish house, with fair shooting attached to it, which might do. So, at any rate, Lady Virginia said, and she drove him over in her two-wheeled pony-cart, one afternoon, to inspect the premises. These proved to be in a sad state of dilapidation, and the aspect of the whole place, under a low, wintry sky and in damp, chilly weather, was scarcely of a nature to encourage doubtful purchasers.

“I couldn’t possibly live in such a house as this !” Wilfrid protested, aghast.

“Well, no ; I don’t suppose you could. But there is no reason why you shouldn’t pull it down and build another one in its place. You have plenty of money.”

“Oh yes,” the young man agreed, rather dolefully ; “I have plenty of money.”

“May I ask,” Lady Virginia inquired, “whether you are going to make a grievance of that ? In all my experience I never met a human being so ungrateful for temporal blessings as you are ! Youth, health, wealth, a seat in what promises to be one of the most interesting Houses of Commons that has been elected within living memory—”

“Not to mention my present undisputed monopoly of your company and attention.”

“Not to mention, as you say, your present privileges, which are worth whatever you may graciously deign to consider their value, but which aren’t granted to everybody. And yet you are not happy ! I wonder what more you want !”

“Something that I can’t have, perhaps. That is generally the way, isn’t it ?”

Lady Virginia never looked more fascinating than when she inclined her head slightly towards one shoulder and threw an innocent, smiling, interrogative glance at the person with whom she happened to be engaged in conversation.

“That is generally the way with geese,” she replied ; “but why be a goose ?”

“Because there’s no help for it, I presume,” said Wilfrid. “Personally, I should much prefer to be a swan ; but one is what one is.”

He was not, however, quite so great a goose as to mention that what he wanted was the love of a girl from the county of Kerry, who contemplated earning her livelihood upon the boards of a London theatre. Not by such a confession as that could he hope to obtain Lady Virginia's sympathy; nor, indeed, did she press him for a reply to her question. She may even have thought (for she was, after all, liable to those little errors of judgment and observation which are one of the penalties of being charmingly pretty) that she could supply one without his help.

"You are going to be a swan," was her consolatory assurance. "You speak wonderfully well, as it is, considering how little practice you have had, and all you want, in order to make your mark in the House, is to catch the peculiar tone of the place—which you won't find very difficult. Your convictions, of course, would be none the worse for being a little more fervent; but they will develop. I shall make it my business to develop them. I have made up my mind to hatch you into a rising statesman, and when I make up my mind to a thing, I always do it."

"So your sister tells me," remarked Wilfrid.

"Oh, does she? Well, I haven't quite made up my mind about her yet; she isn't the easiest person in the world to place. You have discovered that, perhaps?"

"I think I have discovered that she isn't the easiest person in the world to please."

"You have tried, then? I shouldn't have thought so."

It was in the neglected, overgrown garden of the dwelling which Lady Virginia had advised her com-

panion to buy that this colloquy took place, and she paced across the damp grass for some yards with down-cast eyes, while a pensive smile hovered about her lips, before she ejaculated, "Poor Laura!" But she offered no explanation of her pity for her sister, and presently she resumed, in brisk accents:

"Come along! We'll drive home, or we shall catch colds in our heads. You needn't rush in at once with an offer for this mouldy little hole, unless you like; I dare say there won't be any frantic competition for it. What you must absolutely do is to devote your whole soul to the cause of Home Rule. That, you see, is one of the things which can be had by taking a little trouble, and nobody ought to be called a goose for insisting upon it."

The newspapers, at all events, appeared to think that something in the nature of Home Rule was obtainable, if not probable. It was asserted by some that Lord Carnarvon and Lord Ashbourne had an actual scheme ready to offer to the Nationalists, while others declared that Mr. Gladstone had made up his mind to outbid Ministers who, notwithstanding the result of the elections, remained in office. No announcement, official or semi-official, was, however, made until a visit on the part of Mr. Herbert Gladstone to his constituents enabled (or was alleged to enable) the *Leeds Mercury* to publish a so-called authoritative statement of the Liberal leader's intentions.

According to this, an Irish Parliament was to be established, with full legislative and administrative powers, the representation of minorities being, by some means or other, guaranteed, and the payment of a fair share of Imperial charges by Ireland being

somehow secured. Nothing could be more vague, and Mr. Gladstone at once denied the authenticity of the rumor; but, such as it was, it was generally accepted as a kite, sent up to ascertain which way the wind blew.

The Liberal press, upon the whole, seemed disposed to respond with mild and favoring gales; only the *Spectator*—hitherto a warm supporter of Mr. Gladstone through thick and thin—declaring plainly that, unless separation were contemplated, any step in the direction of Home Rule would be a far greater mistake than a policy of steady resistance to Mr. Parnell. But the members of the last Liberal Cabinet made haste to proclaim themselves staunch upholders of the unity of the Empire and to repudiate all sympathy with the apocryphal Leeds programme.

“That,” observed Lady Virginia, calmly, “only means that they haven’t been told anything yet. They will come to heel at the proper moment, like good little dogs; they always do.”

“You shock me,” said the newly elected member for the Heckingley division. “Don’t you believe that an honest man may hold an honest opinion, even though he has been a Cabinet Minister?”

“Virginia is apt to be horribly shocking until one becomes accustomed to her,” put in Mr. Lethbridge; “but after a time, one recognizes a certain brutal truthfulness in her assertions which is not without charm. I don’t, of course, say that there is the slightest justification for her views, which are usually subversive and sometimes immoral.”

“Cabinet Ministers,” returned her ladyship, disdainingly to notice this interpolation, “are honest or

dishonest as the case may be, and as nature and education may have made them ; but, anyhow, they aren't the man at the wheel, and if they want to steer they had better fit out vessels of their own. As a rule, though, they don't want to steer, and I can't see anything shocking in the fact of their having that small supply of common-sense. Surely you don't propose to paddle your own canoe !”

Wilfrid assured her that he had at present no such arrogant pretension. Only he would fain be informed of the designs of his chief, so that he might obediently proclaim his adherence to them, should the dictates of conscience enable him to do so.

“ You will be informed of them as soon as ever your chief becomes Premier,” Lady Virginia boldly promised. “ Meanwhile, nobody asks you to proclaim anything. You are at liberty to rest and be thankful.”

She herself, she added, was about to claim a brief period of rest and liberty. She and her sister had been invited to stay with Sir Samuel Bland, and it presently transpired that they expected to meet their brother under the same hospitable roof. So Wilfrid, declining the cordial invitation extended to him by Mr. Lethbridge to remain where he was, started, one bleak December day, for the silent mansion in Rutland Gate which it was his duty to inhabit, off and on.

It was likewise his duty to peruse the newspapers carefully ; so he bought an armful of these at the railway bookstall to read on the journey, and learned from them that the Right Honorable gentlemen

whom Lady Virginia had irreverently described as "good little dogs" were barking in a very free and independent manner all over the country. If they were going to be Home Rulers they evidently did not know it, and the truth was that the arguments which they adduced against any conceivable project of Home Rule sounded quite in accordance with common-sense. As much could hardly, perhaps, be said for the substitutes which some of them rather gratuitously suggested; but some allowance had to be made for statesmen so uncomfortably situated. There was no getting over the awkward circumstance that neither they nor their opponents could move without the consent and aid of the Irish contingent.

Turning away at last from the verbiage of orations and leading articles, Wilfrid chanced upon a modest paragraph in small type which made him start and draw in his breath sharply. It was headed "St. Martin's Theatre," and was merely a brief announcement to the effect that Miss Nora Power, the young débutante selected by the management to replace a well-known actress who was suffering from temporary indisposition, had met with a sympathetic reception on her first appearance. "The title rôle of such a piece as *The Ambassador's Wife*," it was observed, "demands a degree of experience and artistic finish which cannot reasonably be looked for in a beginner; but Miss Power's performance, though by no means free from the defects of amateurishness, was upon the whole highly creditable, and was even marked, in some cases, by a certain originality of treatment which appeared to captivate the audience. Without going so far as to predict a brilliant professional

career for this clever young lady, we may yet congratulate her upon the success which has attended her first essay—a success which it would be unfair to ascribe solely to the personal charms with which she is so fortunate as to be endowed.”

Now, there was really nothing in this kindly meant little notice which could justify the description of the writer as an “infernally impudent penny-a-liner”; but, as Wilfrid had the railway compartment to himself, it did not very much matter what he might exclaim in his haste. What enraged him was that any man living should have the right to criticise Miss Power at all in print, and the most respectful adulation would have struck him as scarcely less offensive. He was vexed, moreover, at her having disdained to conceal her identity under a stage name.

“But what,” he inquired of silent space, “is the good of my losing my temper about it? The thing is done now, and one can only suppose that it has been done with her father’s consent and approval. I wonder whether he approves of Lord Southfield into the bargain! Well, it’s none of my business, and I can’t say more than I have said.”

CHAPTER XX

THE QUEEN OF AN HOUR

ALTHOUGH the début of Miss Nora Power upon the Metropolitan stage might be none of Wilfrid Elles's business, and although he might have said all that he had to say upon the subject, critics of contemporary drama were otherwise circumstanced, and it was to the credit of these gentlemen that within the short space of a week they, one and all, discovered and announced the dawning of a new star at the St. Martin's Theatre.

Enduring reputations are seldom acquired with such celerity, nor was it pretended on Miss Power's behalf that she had not still a great deal to learn; but that she had achieved a success considerably exceeding what might have been anticipated seemed to be proved. At all events, a diligent student of theatrical intelligence (and of course there is no reason why one shouldn't study matters with which one has no direct personal concern) was justified in so believing. Originally engaged as an understudy to the clever actress whom she had temporarily replaced, Miss Power had, by a stroke of luck, become prominent, and there seemed to be some likelihood of her retaining the position in the front rank which she could scarcely be said to have won.

“But not at that place, I should hope!” was Wilfrid’s inward comment upon such prophecies.

For the St. Martin’s Theatre had always been associated rather with burlesque and comic opera than with serious drama, and *The Ambassador’s Wife* (which was adapted from a French play entitled, *La Femme du Ministre*) was probably not quite the piece that one would select as a stepping-stone towards fame for one’s sister or one’s cousin, supposing that one were afflicted with a histrionic sister or cousin. Probably it was not; but Wilfrid could not say for certain, and he had a queer reluctance to set his doubts at rest by the simple process of expending half a guinea upon a stall. He was always a little prone to put off disagreeable experiences as long as might be.

A chance encounter hurried him towards the not very formidable leap at which he was inclined to crane. Happening, one afternoon, to come across his old friend Douglas, who was still one of the aides-de-camp at Dublin Castle, he willingly accepted an invitation to dine at the latter’s club and “go on somewhere” afterwards; it was not until dinner was nearly over that he had the curiosity to inquire whither they were bound, and thus learned that tickets had been taken for the St. Martin’s.

“They tell me it isn’t half bad,” his host remarked, “and the girl who takes Nellie Travers’s part—Nellie Travers is seedy, you know—is a stunner in point of looks, I believe.”

“So I understand,” said Wilfrid, stoically. “In fact, I know she is; for it so happens that I am personally acquainted with her.”

Douglas pricked up his ears and grinned.

“You are, are you? Well—what else? Any confidences that you may have to impart to a young man from the country will be strictly respected.”

But this levity met with prompt rebuke.

“Miss Power,” Wilfrid announced, “is a lady by birth, who has taken to the stage only because it is necessary, or because she thinks it necessary, for her to earn her own living. I should imagine that she is very carefully looked after by her father. You may remember, perhaps, my going from Dublin to stay with the Powers in Kerry three years ago or more. Since then the old gentleman has been growing poorer and poorer—”

“Naturally!”

“And now he has had to let his place. I am rather surprised, I must confess, at his allowing his daughter to go in for acting as a profession; but, after all, there is nothing to be ashamed of in the mere fact of being an actress, and, as I say, I haven’t the least doubt that she is well looked after.”

Douglas had the air of suppressing a smile.

“Somebody,” he began, “told me—”

But Wilfrid inquired with such sternness what somebody had told him that he jocularly dropped his head below the level of the table and begged for mercy.

“I don’t suppose there’s anything in it,” he declared, resuming an erect attitude, on being requested not to play the idiot, “but Southfield has always been a great man at the St. Martin’s, and the young lady is supposed to be a friend of his. And you know—or perhaps you don’t know—what Southfield is?”

“I know,” answered Wilfrid, “that Lord South-

field is a friend of Mr. Power's. It is he, in fact, who has taken Rathfinnan Abbey, for the sake of the shooting, and if he has secured an engagement for Miss Power to oblige his landlord, I don't see what there is in that to set foul-mouthed and foul-minded fellows chattering."

Douglas hastened to express conviction and contrition. But perhaps he felt that he owed his guest some slight return for the flattering epithets addressed to him by implication, for he added :

"The old gentleman does well to make friends with any member of the Upper House. I don't know who, except the Lords, can be counted upon now to defend him and other land-owners from the rapacity of you Radical robbers. If I were in his place I should certainly feel more amiably disposed towards Southfield than towards Mr. Elles, M.P."

Well, it was easier to defend the Radical position than to account for an irritability which had perhaps been somewhat foolishly displayed ; so mutual recriminations kept the two men more or less amicably engaged until they reached the theatre. But from that moment not another word was to be got out of Wilfrid, whose eyes and attention remained riveted upon the stage.

Now, it may as well be admitted at once that what thus absorbed him and forced him, a little against his will, to join in the hearty applause of the audience was not a manifestation of the highest genius, nor even of a talent greatly exceeding the ordinary. The play was a light little play, and Miss Power's part was a tolerably easy one. Nevertheless, such as her task was, she acquitted herself of it almost to perfection.

In technical skill she had immensely improved, and she threw into her rendering of the character that she represented a certain individuality which was all the more clever because such slight scope was, in truth, allowed her for anything of the kind. A piece which in Paris had been considered a trifle broad had been altered and toned down to suit the modest British public until next to nothing of it remained to account for its great popularity, save the fact that it was very well staged and that the eighteenth century costumes were pretty. But what became more and more perceptible as the plot advanced was that the Ambassador's wife, impersonated by Miss Power, had the making or marring of the thing entirely in her own hands; and that she managed to keep all parts of the house pleased and attentive proved, at any rate, that she knew what she was about. With mixed feelings, Wilfrid was fain to confess that she was not, after this, in the least likely to fail in the vocation which she had chosen.

Very early in the proceedings he was aware of having been recognized by her. Not that recognition was vouchsafed to him in the shape of the faintest gesture or smile; but more than once their eyes met, and more than once—when the nature of the dialogue permitted—he fancied that her words were rather pointedly addressed to him. To his imagination she seemed to be triumphing, after a good-humored fashion, over the priggish acquaintance who had presumed to address a written sermon to her.

“I know you disapprove of me, my good man,” she had the air of saying, “but, really, I don't care.

Other people approve of me, as you see, and that is all I want."

Wilfrid's reply, which he did his best to throw across the footlights by the language of the eyes, was :

"But I am not disapproving at all. On the contrary, I think you are in every way admirable, and I am agreeably surprised to find that no objectionable speeches have been put into your mouth. All the same, I don't feel, and I never shall feel, that you are in your proper place as the paid servant of a vulgar public, which would at any moment have the right to hiss you, and which has always the right to indulge in coarse criticisms upon your personal appearance."

But perhaps this was rather too intricate a message to transmit by the medium aforesaid, and the fascinating lady with the powdered hair and the diamond necklace (could they be real diamonds? Wilfrid wondered) may have failed to interpret it. In any case, her indifference was beyond a doubt, and when the curtain fell upon the first act one occupant of the second row of stalls was conscious that a gulf far wider than that interposed by the orchestra yawned between him and the reigning queen of an hour.

"May one," Douglas inquired, with exaggerated timidity "take the liberty of remarking that Miss Power is a devilish good-looking girl?"

"Of course you may," was his companion's reply. "That privilege is included in the half-guinea that you paid for your ticket. She can't help it, I suppose."

“Being good-looking or being called so, do you mean?”

“Obviously, she can help neither. And I dare say she is quite satisfied with things as they are in both instances. Shall we go out and smoke?”

Outside Douglas encountered many acquaintances, while Wilfrid was accosted by one whom he would not have known again had not the young fellow in question reminded him that they had met in the South of Ireland on the occasion of some private theatricals at Rathfinnan Abbey. This youth, who had been quartered with his regiment in the neighborhood at the time mentioned, and who had himself taken a subordinate part in a highly successful performance, was loudly and enthusiastically appreciative of the new actress.

“I was sure,” he declared, “that she had it in her, and, by George! she has. You may say that it’s rare luck for her to have stepped into Nellie Travers’s shoes; but nothing big can be done without luck. Frederick the Great and Marlborough and Napoleon, and all those old Johnnies, admitted that, you know.”

“Some great commanders,” Wilfrid observed, “have had reason to regret their luck. I hope Miss Power may never deplore the consequences of hers.”

“Why on earth should she? Oh, I see!—but, upon my word, I don’t think there is much danger of that. And I must say I should have thought that you, as a friend of the family, would have known better than to—to insinuate such things.”

The lad’s prompt indignation was not displeasing

to Wilfrid, who unhesitatingly begged his pardon and Miss Power's.

"All I meant was that rumors, for which very often there isn't a shadow of foundation, are apt to be circulated about popular actresses. I can't honestly say that I should covet for any friend of mine the distinction of being a popular actress."

"I don't know about rumors," returned the other, who, perhaps, had never heard of Lord Southfield; "I know Miss Power is all right, and I know that, but for her, Mr. Power would find it a hardish matter to pay for food and lodging. He himself told me, the other day, that he wasn't getting a penny of rent from his tenants. And they call this a free country!"

Wilfrid was upon the point of rejoicing that nobody had ever called Ireland a free country; but he refrained. What was more to the purpose was to ascertain—as he easily did—Mr. Power's London address, and when the additional information that Miss Power was in the habit of receiving her friends on Sunday afternoons had been volunteered, he returned to his place, somewhat comforted. That a foolish young subaltern should have fired up at the bare hint of a breath of scandal tarnishing Nora's fame did not, to be sure, prove much; yet it had been exhilarating to hear her thus championed.

Exhilarating, also, should the two remaining acts have been found by a well-wisher of the principal personage concerned therein; for they went very well indeed—so well as to result in repeated calls before the curtain and unstinted applause on the part of Douglas and others. But the subject of a genuine ovation had no special sign of gratitude or acknowl-

edgment to bestow upon Mr. Elles, and that spoiled all. The omission (considering that she knew perfectly well who was clapping his hands within a few yards of her) was marked, and must have been intentionally so. He was evidently not in favor, and was disposed to reconsider a half-formed intention of calling upon her and her father on the following Sunday. Lady Virginia, who also received on that day, would doubtless be in London ere long, and he said to himself, with a rueful little smile, that the finger of Destiny pointed rather towards Mayfair than towards West Kensington.

Nevertheless, he hastily took leave of Douglas at the exit, and hurried along the wet, muddy Strand to the stage-door, near which he hovered for some time under a chilly, penetrating rain. Such conduct was ridiculous, no doubt; still a man does want to find out, if he can, what cause of offence he has given to a lady whom he would not for the world offend. At length Wilfrid was rewarded by a glimpse of two muffled female figures, in whom he divined Nora and an attendant, darting across the pavement to a four-wheeled cab. Ridiculous as he might have been to get his feet wet for that, he would have been even more so had he retired without making himself known; so he stepped resolutely forward and took off his hat.

“Oh, Mr. Elles, isn't it?” asked a not too cordial voice out of the depths of the cab. “How do you do? I thought I saw you in the theatre.”

Wilfrid said something confused and congratulatory. He was thinking to himself, “What an ass I am; I might have remembered that she was sure to

have a maid or somebody with her." He inquired after her father and requested permission to call, which was granted, after a perceptible pause.

"Oh yes; any Sunday afternoon we shall be very glad. On other days I am generally out or busy. You have our address? I won't keep you standing in the rain any longer. Good-night."

"I won't!" muttered Wilfrid, after Miss Power had been driven away and he had thrown himself into a hansom. "She evidently meant me to understand that she would rather I didn't. On second thoughts, I will, though. Why should I quarrel with her?—or she with me? I'll apologize for that letter, if she thinks I owe her an apology: but I decline to be trampled upon in this way; I haven't deserved it. Besides, I am bound in common politeness and decency to pay my respects to people who have twice shown me hospitality."

CHAPTER XXI

WARWICK CRESCENT

WILFRID woke up the next morning with that vague recollection of having made rather a fool of himself overnight, to which few of us can affect to be total strangers, and which is one of the most disagreeable of all waking sensations. He ought not to have waylaid Nora Power at the stage-door. It had been a very stupid thing to do; common-sense should have warned him that the moment was ill-chosen for the re-establishment of friendly relations; she had shown him by her manner that she did not like it, and if he had been snubbed for his pains, he had only himself to thank. All this he fully admitted to himself, while shaving, and he likewise acknowledged that further interference on his part with her private affairs was extremely unlikely to be crowned with success. At the same time, he saw no reason to refrain from calling upon her and her father. To take no notice of them, now that they had come to live in London, would be not only a breach of good manners but tantamount to a confession that their former friendship was a thing of the past; and if such an intimation was to be made, it must come from them, and not from him. It has always been the boast of Englishmen that in this

country political differences are not incompatible with private intimacies.

As far as that went, political differences were, for the time being, in a state of abeyance; nobody, except the extremists on both sides, could say with precision what his political attitude was going to be, nor was anybody who could help it inclined to open his lips before Parliament met. Wilfrid, being under no obligation to open his, kept them closed and hoped that Mr. Power would not be so inconsiderate as to demand positive declarations from him. Anyhow, he could at least go on Sunday and find out how the land lay; and it so happened that the Saturday evening's post brought him a letter which gave him some sort of indirect encouragement. For he could not but feel it to be rather satisfactory that, while Miss Power was gathering laurels in London, Lord Southfield should be contentedly blazing away in Kerry, removed by several hundred miles both from politicians and from actresses. His lordship's missive, which was dated from Rathfinnan Abbey, was brief but cordial.

“DEAR ELLES,—If you are inclined for a week or two of rough shooting, come over here, and I think I can promise to show you fair sport. We got forty-two couple of snipe yesterday to three guns, which I don't call bad—especially as one of us was a duffer. However, he leaves to-morrow, and we hope you will take his place. Cock are tolerably plentiful this season, and the whole place simply swarms with rabbits. I saw Virginia not long ago, and heard from her of your having romped in at Heckingley. Rather a bore for you, I should think, to have to be at Westminster when the show opens; but that is all the more reason for your taking a holiday while you can.

Yours very truly,
SOUTHFIELD.”

It was necessary, for various reasons, to decline this invitation; but it was pleasant, for obvious reasons, to have received it. Surely, if the gossip alluded to by Douglas had any foundation in fact, Lord Southfield would not be where he was! After all, why should not the man be a good-natured kind of person? Experience proves that good-natured and disinterested persons are not so uncommon as cynics pretend. Moreover, a keen sportsman can't really, Wilfrid thought, be such a bad fellow.

These cogitations, whatever may have been their intrinsic worth, sent him off, on the Sunday afternoon, in a tolerably cheerful and liberal disposition of mind to seek for Warwick Crescent, which was the name of the remote row of houses selected by Mr. Power on account of their remoteness and consequently moderate rental. Warwick Crescent took some finding, neither Wilfrid nor his cabman having the least idea of where the place was; but at length they hit upon it somewhere on the other side of the Earl's Court Road, and one of them shuddered involuntarily as he stepped out beneath a narrow portico and pulled the door-bell. Somehow, the outlying districts of London convey a far more painful impression of genteel poverty than the humblest country cottage, and although Irish landlords might theoretically be in the wrong and Irish tenants in the right, it did seem rather like evidence of injustice on somebody's part that the master of Rathfinnan Abbey should have been driven to seek shelter in Warwick Crescent.

But the house, when once you were inside it, did not look so uncomfortable. The parlor-maid who

took Wilfrid's name, and who presently requested him to walk up-stairs, left him long enough in the little hall to enable him to take note of surrounding objects, and to satisfy himself that his friends could not be in actual want. The stair-carpet was a new one; some pictures which he recognized had been brought over from Ireland, and imparted a certain home-like aspect to the place. What did not please him quite so well was the sight of several hats, coats, and sticks upon an adjacent table. He had hoped that Miss Power's London friends might be less numerous, and that, even if he did not find her quite alone, he might contrive to outstay any chance visitors.

A small drawing-room, crowded with tea-drinkers, held out very little promise of the fulfilment of that expectation. Nora detached herself from a group to extend her hand to him, introduced him to a lady whose name he did not catch, and immediately turned away to resume her part in a colloquy which his entrance had interrupted. Had he obeyed his first impulse, he would have been out of the house in a very few minutes; but there was a substratum of useful obstinacy in his temperament which preserved him from showing temper in that way. After all, he was, or had been, this contemptuous young woman's friend; he was not conscious of having done anything to forfeit her regard, and if he had been guilty of some unintentional offence, he had a right to hear from her own lips what it was. He therefore continued to converse doggedly with his neighbor (who, it appeared, was connected with a ladies' newspaper, and who was kind enough to point out various rather dingy celeb-

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rities to him) until, by ones and twos, the assemblage gradually dispersed. It had been composed, he gathered, almost exclusively of actors, actresses, and representatives of the press, and he said to himself that a more unattractive-looking crew he had never set eyes upon.

When the door had closed behind the last of them Nora hastily flung one of the windows open and drew a long breath. Her gesture, as she sank down upon a chair, was so eloquent that Wilfrid was emboldened to exclaim :

“ I don’t wonder at your feeling the need of fresh air after that ! What people ! ”

She shrugged her shoulders.

“ If they had been dukes and duchesses, or even Royal Highnesses, they would have left the atmosphere of this stuffy little room in the same exhausted condition, I suppose,” she remarked. “ Besides, what would you have ? One must belong to one’s world.”

“ Why should you pretend to belong to that sort of world ? You ought not to belong to it—and you don’t.”

“ I am an actress, and it is important for me to keep upon good terms with other actresses, as well as with persons of both sexes who write for the newspapers. Some of them, I dare say, are not as highly refined as they might be ; but is it quite consistent for a Radical to turn up his nose at them ? ”

“ What has Radicalism to do with it ? Even a despised Radical may claim the privilege of choosing his own associates, may he not ? ”

“ Oh, no doubt. And you have chosen to honor us with your company to-day.”

Wilfrid sighed.

“As a rebuke, that is unanswerable,” he confessed ; “there would be no excuse for me if I had come here to criticise your friends—and if they were your friends. But I came, on the contrary, simply and solely in order to apologize.”

“For what?”

“For having ventured upon a previous liberty, which you have very likely forgotten. You didn’t condescend to notice it at the time, anyhow.”

“You mean that letter that you wrote about Lord Southfield? I didn’t answer it, because I must own that I did think it rather a liberty on your part to write as you did of a man who has never spoken against you behind your back. But, since you wish to apologize, you have changed your mind, I hope.”

Wilfrid could not say that he had. Still, he acknowledged that he had presumed unwarrantably upon past favors and that he had made a mistake in imagining that he might sound a deferential note of warning without being guilty of impertinence. It was on that account that he felt it incumbent upon him to beg Miss Power’s pardon.

“You have rather an odd way of begging pardon,” Nora remarked, “but I bear no malice. Don’t do it again, though, please.”

“I still think,” Wilfrid began, “that it is rather a pity—”

“Think what you please,” she interrupted ; “only, for goodness’ sake, don’t compel me to quarrel with you. Lord Southfield has been extremely kind to me, and I am under great obligations to him. Consequently, I can’t hear him traduced without taking his side.

You are dying to traduce him, I know ; but what would be the use ? You won't convince me ; you will only make me tell you some home truths which won't convince you, and of which I shall very likely repent when it is too late. Can't you be persuaded to live and let live ?”

It really did not seem as if there was much else to be done. Nora was aware that he detested the profession which she had adopted and the inevitable results of her success therein ; she was also aware that he disapproved altogether of the patron whose influence had brought that success within her grasp. What more could be accomplished by telling her that her name was already mentioned freely in connection with Southfield's, and that it behooved her to be very circumspect in her future relations with her father's tenant ? Nothing, probably, except the quarrel which she appeared to deprecate. So he answered, submissively :

“ I'll bite my tongue, then. It's admitted that I have been officious and presumptuous, and I'll try not to repeat the offence. Will that do ?”

“ Well,” answered Nora, calmly, “ it will and it won't. For my own part, I ask nothing better than to live at peace with all the world ; I proved that, I think, by leaving your letter unanswered. But I may as well tell you that apologizing for what, I dare say, was kindly meant won't cause us to look upon you exactly as a friend in this house. How can we, now that you have proclaimed aloud your alliance with our bitterest enemies ?”

“ I have never done that,” Wilfrid declared.

“ You forget your election speeches, which were

reported in some newspapers and copied into others. I don't for a moment deny your right to be a Home Ruler ; only you can't, in such a case as this—a case which really means life or death to us—expect to run with the hare and hunt with the hounds. Lady Virginia Lethbridge's approval will have to suffice for you ; you mustn't claim to be our friend as well as hers."

The plea that political differences did not necessarily preclude private friendships sounded a little feeble ; but it was the only one that he could put forward. To assert that he was not as yet a decided Home Ruler would scarcely have availed him (though the assertion would have been true enough), and indeed she might have quoted passages from those speeches of his which he would have found it difficult to explain away.

She replied, with a laugh which sounded compassionate and not unkindly :

"I quite understand ; I am beginning to understand Englishmen better than I did. To you it is only a game, in which you don't happen to be on our side ; but in case you should meet my father—"

She broke off, as the slamming of the front door caught her ear.

"There he is !" she exclaimed ; "he always goes out on Sunday afternoons, because he dislikes my visitors almost as much as you do. But you can't escape now, and there isn't time to prepare you. All I beg of you is to remember that he is an Irishman and hot-tempered. Don't answer him ; let him say anything he likes, and get away as quickly as you can. Then I shall be able to tell him that he has

insulted his guest, and he will be ready to abase himself to the earth before you the next time you come."

This exhortation, with all that it implied (for was it not evident that Nora both wished him to call again and was eager to keep the peace between him and her father?) would have preserved Wilfrid from losing his temper under no matter what provocation; but Mr. Power, when he presently entered the room, was not at all provocative. He was only very stiff and chilling; he only addressed the intruder ceremoniously as "Mr. Elles," and talked about the weather, with occasional glances over his shoulder at the clock on the mantel-piece. It would have been impossible to say "Get out!" more politely or more plainly, and Wilfrid lost no time in complying with the unspoken request.

He might have effected his retreat in good order had he not been indiscreet enough, at the last moment, to allude in congratulatory terms to the scene which he had recently witnessed at the St. Martin's Theatre. This was too much for Mr. Power, who accompanied him down-stairs and exploded, like a shell, in the hall.

"Damn it all, sir! do you call that sort of thing a subject for congratulation? Do you imagine that it gives me pleasure to hear of my daughter's having won the approval of an impudent, howling mob? I can understand that you and the other rebels may think it very good sport to have reduced us to the level of mountebanks at a fair, but, for the Lord's sake, keep your congratulations to yourselves! We really don't want them."

“I beg your pardon,” said Wilfrid, meekly. “I dare say I should feel as you do about it; in fact, that is very much my own feeling. But I don’t think the general feeling with regard to the stage is at all what it used to be, and surely it is allowable to applaud any kind of artistic success. As for me, I am certainly not a rebel; I don’t know that I am even in favor of Irish Home Rule yet. How can anybody know until some definite scheme is announced?”

“Well, well!” returned Mr. Power, who was holding the door open, “I don’t profess any comprehension of the subtleties which find so much favor with people of your way of thinking. I know who are my friends and who are my foes; that’s enough for me. For choice I prefer an honest and open foe; but it doesn’t much signify. Good-evening.”

After that, it scarcely seemed as if a second visit to Warwick Crescent could be contemplated. Wilfrid, as he walked sadly away, said to himself that the old gentleman, however unreasonable he might sound, was perhaps in the right. You cannot very well remain friends with people whose means of subsistence you propose to annex, and this detestable Irish question must, it appeared to him, sooner or later resolve itself into something like spoliation of Irish landlords.

CHAPTER XXII

PROFFERED PATRONAGE

WHILE the New Year was still quite brand-new, Lady Virginia Lethbridge opened her Tilney Street house, being accompanied thither by her husband, her sister, and a somewhat larger staff of servants than she was accustomed to bring to London in the month of January. It was a year, she explained, destined to produce important new departures, and thereby demanding unwontedly early arrivals. To be upon the spot in good time to witness the opening of Parliament, the discomfiture of an impotent Ministry, and the triumphant introduction of measures which she had advocated through thick and thin was a duty which she owed alike to herself and to her fellow-workers in a righteous cause.

“So I have refused a dozen country invitations, and here I am,” she concluded, with the virtuous air of one who shrinks from no sacrifice where the interests of the fatherland are at stake.

“That,” observed Mr. Lethbridge, “is the excuse. The unvarnished truth is that Virginia hates the country, because there are no shops nor theatres there.”

“But there are people there; most people are there just now,” put in Lady Laura, impartially.

“You mean, of course, most men. Well, that is

true. A large proportion of them will be here presently, though, and it has to be borne in mind that Virginia's men are apt to be—what shall we call them?"

"In the presence of Mr. Elles, perhaps we had better not call them anything," said Lady Laura.

"I was only going to remark that they are apt to be more of politicians than sportsmen. That can't offend Elles, who is both."

"I can lay my hand upon my heart," Lady Virginia declared, "and assure you that I am not here in this horrid, foggy weather for the pleasure of entertaining any of the politicians whom you rather coarsely call my men, Tom. Heaven is my witness that nine out of every ten of them bore me nearly as much as fox-hunting squires. Not you, you know," she added, throwing a nod and a smile towards Wilfrid across the round dinner-table, upon which she was resting her shapely elbows; "you, I am happy to say, continue to be interesting in more ways than one."

Wilfrid bowed, and replied that he was very glad to hear it. In what ways, for instance, if he might make so bold as to ask?

"Perhaps I'll tell you on some more private occasion. In the meantime, I'll plead guilty about the shops and the theatres—especially the theatres. On Wednesday next you will dine here, please, at the ghastly hour of seven o'clock, preparatory to escorting us to a piece which begins at eight, and of which I don't wish to miss a word. Now don't say you have another engagement."

"I haven't; but if I had I would get out of it," Wilfrid answered, gallantly.

“How nice of you! I can’t hope that you haven’t already seen *The Ambassador’s Wife*; but it will bear being seen more than once, by all accounts, and, as you may imagine, I have a certain curiosity with regard to Southfield’s latest protégée. She is extraordinarily pretty, they tell me, and a clever little cat into the bargain.”

Wilfrid preserved a creditably unmoved countenance. He said to himself that if Lady Virginia wished to get a rise out of him—and it was pretty evident that she did—disappointment should be her portion. Nevertheless, he could not prevent a ring of annoyance from being perceptible in his voice as he returned:

“Miss Power is certainly very pretty, and good judges pronounce her acting clever, I believe. Why she should be called a cat I don’t know—or your brother’s protégée either.”

“She sha’n’t be called a cat, then,” said Lady Virginia, laughing a little maliciously; “though it’s a perfectly respectable and respectful term. The other, perhaps, isn’t; Southfield’s own claims to respectability being so deplorably shaky! All the same, I only meant that he had taken the girl under his wing—which is a notorious fact.”

“As far as I can judge, her own wings are strong enough to carry her to any height that she may be ambitious of reaching,” Wilfrid said.

It was irritating to hear Nora Power described as being, in however innocent a sense, under Lord Southfield’s protection, and not much pleasure was to be anticipated from listening to the comments which Lady Virginia, in common with the rest of the pay-

ing public, would have every right to pass upon her appearance and capacities; yet there was obviously nothing for it but to suffer in silence. Fortunately, some allusion to Irish affairs was always sufficient to start her ladyship upon a fresh scent, and this he skilfully proceeded to make by proclaiming his sincere sympathy with Miss Power's father and other impoverished land-owners in disturbed districts.

Now, it so happened that the evening selected by Lady Virginia for her visit to the St. Martin's Theatre was a somewhat important one in Nora's theatrical career. Only a few hours earlier had she been definitely and permanently engaged to play the part which Miss Nellie Travers (possibly in a huff) had intimated that ill-health would prevent her from resuming, and, an announcement to the above effect having been hastily printed upon the play-bills, the young actress's appearance upon the stage was made the signal for a little ovation more flattering to her than to the older public favorite whom she had displaced. Perhaps this encouraged her to do her very best; at all events, it seemed to Wilfrid and others that she quite surpassed herself in the first act, at the close of which she was called no less than three times before the curtain.

Lady Virginia, from the box occupied by her party, added an unstinted contribution to the general applause. She had already thrown many appreciative whispers over her shoulder to Wilfrid, who sat beside her, and now she said:

“Your Kathleen, or Biddy, or whatever her name is, reflects the greatest credit upon the distressful country. How grateful she ought to be to her com-

patriots for driving her out of it to a place where glory waits her! Who will dare to say, after this, that Home Rule doesn't distribute indirect benefits all round?"

"I should imagine that Mr. Power may be found to possess the requisite audacity," answered Wilfrid. "His notions of glory are probably different from yours."

"Silly old thing!" murmured Lady Virginia, sweeping the house with her glasses. "What more would he have, I should like to know? If his daughter behaves herself, she will have an excellent chance now of marrying really well. Even Southfield himself, if he were an idiot—but luckily Southfield is not an idiot in that particular way. Otherwise, I should begin to feel seriously uneasy."

Wilfrid, for his part, wondered whether he would have felt more seriously uneasy than he did, or less so, if Lord Southfield had been an idiot in that particular way. The entrance of a dapper young statesman, who was one of Lady Virginia's intimates, enabled him at that moment to shift his position and seat himself behind Lady Laura, of whom he presently took occasion to inquire:

"What about the Bland alliance? Is your brother preparing himself for the plunge?"

"Oh, I suppose so," answered the girl, with a slight laugh; "we all end by doing what Virginia tells us to do. But for the present he has bolted into the wilderness, as you know. If he descends upon London one of these fine mornings, it won't be for the sake of paying homage to Miss Bland, I

suspect. One must admit that there are great excuses for him, and that she is quite charming."

"Miss Bland?"

"Well, no; not exactly. Is she—I hardly know how to put it—is she a straitlaced sort of person?"

"Miss Power," answered Wilfrid, with some warmth, "is as thoroughly a lady by birth as you and your sister. Why do you ask such a question?"

"Only because my brother isn't straitlaced—nor, if it comes to that, are all ladies straitlaced. You are feeling nervous about your friend, I know, and that is why you are interested in Miss Bland. Well, you are quite right to be nervous."

Wilfrid bit his lip and frowned.

"I don't see that there is very much use in my being nervous," he remarked, after a pause. "What can I do?"

Lady Laura laughed.

"Shall I tell you? Get Virginia to take her up and patronize her. It won't be difficult, for there is nothing that Virginia loves more than patronizing celebrities, and I may tell you that there is nothing Southfield hates more than coming into collision with Virginia. Once let Miss Power get a footing in Tilney Street and he will drop her like—like others whom he has dropped. He won't think it good enough to go on with—and indeed it won't be."

The idea really did not seem to be such a bad one, and Wilfrid was not ungrateful to Lady Laura for suggesting it. She had done so, he felt sure, out of sheer good nature, a quality in which neither she nor her sister was deficient. Perhaps, too, he

was vaguely conscious of a certain magnanimity on the part of the girl, who, without intending to accept him, must have been well aware that he intended to propose to her. Few women care to lend a helping hand to rivals, whether the subject of rivalry is valueless in their eyes or not. So he said :

“Thanks ; I’ll take the hint. Not, of course, that I am entitled to meddle in any way with Miss Power’s business.”

“At all events, you had better not give Virginia to understand that you are,” remarked Lady Laura, dryly.

He was careful to avoid so infelicitous a method of attaining his end ; nor, as it chanced, was he called upon to exercise diplomatic skill in the matter. For Lady Virginia, during the second and third acts, became genuinely enthusiastic, and of her own accord expressed a strong wish to make the acquaintance of the gifted young woman whom she was pleased to dub a genius.

“I wasn’t prepared for what we have seen,” she avowed. “I pictured to myself a pretty little girl who could act a little bit, and who would perhaps be knowing enough to make herself the fashion in certain circles. But this—why, this is the real thing, you know ! I must manage to have a little talk with her somehow or other.”

“I dare say that might be managed,” answered Wilfrid, with no undue appearance of eagerness that it should. “Can I be of any use in bringing about an introduction ?”

Lady Virginia considered for a moment, and then returned :

“Yes—why not? I’ll tell you what you shall do. Go behind presently and ask her to come back and have supper with us. That will do capitally; and you may say I have room for her in the carriage. You and Tom can take a hansom.”

“Won’t that be a little—informal?” asked Wilfrid, hesitatingly.

“Informality is a compliment. Oh, she’ll come, you may be sure.”

Possibly she would. He certainly hoped that she would, and saw no reason why she should not. The more he thought of it the more clear it became to him that Lady Laura was right, and that complications which he dreaded might be nipped in the bud by the simple measure of precaution which she had been so clever as to prescribe. Absorbed in various reflections, he had paid little attention to the closing scenes of the play, although Nora was very strong indeed in them, and as soon as the curtain fell he hurried off to execute his commission.

Not until he was hastening down the narrow corridors, to which a muffled roar of smitten hands and stamping feet penetrated, did it occur to him to wonder what sort of a reception awaited him, or whether he would be received at all. He had not called in Warwick Crescent since Mr. Power had with such emphatic politeness accompanied him to the door, and it seemed by no means certain that the privilege of an interview would be accorded to him on the present occasion. He decided at length to intrust an attendant with one of his cards, on which he had written: “Lady Virginia Lethbridge, who is most anxious to know you, asks me to beg that you

will give her the pleasure of coming to supper with her in Tilney Street. She will wait until you are ready, and will drive you there in her carriage."

After an interval of five minutes or so, his messenger returned, bearing a folded scrap of paper, which Wilfrid made haste to peruse.

"Many thanks," was Miss Power's reply, "but my father always expects me to drive straight home from the theatre, and he would not, in any case, allow me to accept invitations from strangers. I shall be very glad to make your friend's acquaintance, if she thinks it worth while to call (provided that she will kindly refrain from saying anything about Home Rule), and I am at home on Sunday afternoons."

Here was a nice sort of message to carry back to a lady whose good-will should have been disdained by no professional actress, however eminent! Nevertheless, Wilfrid could not forbear from inwardly chuckling when he delivered it, as in duty bound, to Nora's would-be patroness. He regretted, for some reasons, that his mission had failed; yet he was not altogether sorry, for others, that a snub should be inflicted upon one totally unused to such treatment. And, indeed, Lady Virginia did look both astonished and angry for a moment. But the next she snatched the paper which Wilfrid still held from his fingers, and smiles broke out upon her face while she perused it.

"Oh, I see! Well, I shall call," she announced, "and I shall certainly talk about Home Rule. What will you bet that I don't make a convert of Miss Power within a month?"

“Any odds you like,” answered Wilfrid.

“Well, I’ll take ten to one in five-pound notes ; you can’t call that greedy. And even if I don’t succeed in my noble enterprise, I may at least be of some use to Miss Power in other ways. Which perhaps was what you and Laura were saying when I overheard you coupling her name with mine just now.”

“You have wonderfully sharp ears,” remarked Wilfrid, a little disconcerted.

“Pretty well, and eyes too. But even if I were as blind as a bat and as deaf as an adder—no, you needn’t be alarmed, I am not going to finish my sentence. Here comes Tom to ask whether we mean to stay in the theatre till the lights are put out.”

CHAPTER XXIII

LADY VIRGINIA KEEPS HER WORD

THAT Lady Virginia should have divined his secret—and that she had done so, her remark, quoted at the end of the last chapter, placed virtually beyond a doubt—was rather a relief than otherwise to Wilfrid. It was, after all, just as well that she should know why he was not a marrying man, and it was satisfactory that her intention of befriending Nora had not been affected by the discovery which she had made. Wilfrid had noticed that many ladies are apt to conceive a prejudice against the objects of their male friends' affections. He did not call in Warwick Crescent on the following Sunday afternoon, much though he would have liked to make that pilgrimage. He went, instead, to Tilney Street, and was thus enabled to learn that Lady Virginia had been as good as her word.

“She has gone off in all her glory to dazzle and captivate the Power family,” Lady Laura, by whom he was received, informed him, “and her own Sunday visitors, except you, have been turned away from the door.”

Wilfrid said he felt proud and flattered that an exception had been made in his favor.

“Ah, but the exception was made by me, not by

her. I thought it was very likely that you would turn up in the course of the afternoon, so I ventured to give orders for your admission, in case you did. Rather a bore for you, I know, but cheer up! Virginia left nearly an hour ago, and her cobs get over the ground at a great pace when the streets are empty. Allow her twenty minutes or so to bind Miss Power to her chariot wheels—which ought to be ample—and you may expect to see her back here in another half-hour.”

“I am in no hurry to see her back,” Wilfrid declared; “and I fancy that it may take her more than twenty minutes to make a conquest of Miss Power.”

Lady Laura shook her head.

“Not more than two—if she means business—as I believe she does. In the whole course of her life Virginia has never been beaten, and she has quite made up her mind that Southfield shall marry Miss Bland. Consequently, this lady actress, who might prove an obstacle, will be made impossible. So much the better for her!”

A short conversation upon Nora’s physical and artistic fascinations followed; but Lady Laura was evidently not very much interested in her, and did not, oddly enough, seem to suspect that her interlocutor was. She said:

“It is pretty of you to care what becomes of an Irish landlord’s daughter; for I take it that Irish landlords and their daughters don’t care a straw what becomes of you. Except, perhaps, that they may have a pious hope of your ending upon the gallows.”

Wilfrid shrugged his shoulders.

“Quite so,” he agreed, ruefully; “and all the time my sympathies are more with them than with their enemies. That is, I want them to have fair treatment, which I am afraid they are very unlikely to get, and I think it is very hard upon some of them that they should be punished for the sins of their class. For the matter of that, I think it is a little bit hard upon me that I should be called a rebel and a renegade because I can’t help seeing that we owe atonement and reparation to the Irish people. But I won’t talk politics. You hate them, don’t you?”

“Not more than you do, I dare say. Yet you go in for politics at Virginia’s bidding, just as Southfield will have to go in for Miss Bland, and as I shall have to go in for—well, for Sir Samuel himself, if she orders me. It is really rather funny when one comes to think of it.”

“I see nothing funny at all in the idea of your ‘going in,’ as you call it, for that superannuated cad!” exclaimed Wilfrid, quite shocked. “Surely you are not serious!”

“Oh, well,” returned the girl, with a laugh, “Sir Samuel Bland or somebody else—what does it signify? I only meant that Virginia is irresistible. But to whom do I say it? And, after all, I suppose you do find this Irish business and Lord Carnarvon’s resignation and the rest of it more or less exciting. Your side is going to turn the Government out at once, isn’t it?”

Wilfrid was quite unable to say; and this was the more excusable on his part since more influential

and better informed supporters of Mr. Gladstone were in a like predicament. He thought (as not a few of them also did) that the best solution, so far as Ireland was concerned, would be a conference and an agreement between the leaders of both parties; but the retirement of the Viceroy seemed to show that no such policy was in contemplation, and it was generally believed that the existing Ministry did not desire to retain office on sufferance.

“In a certain sense it is rather exciting,” he confessed. “We seem to have reached a turning-point in our history, and one can’t help wondering where we shall all be when we are round the corner. But I would much rather look on than take a hand, however humble, in the fray. Nature, I suppose, never intended me for a partisan.”

“But Virginia evidently does, which is more to the purpose. Virginia would never allow a trumpery little thing like Nature to stand in the way.”

“Why,” asked Wilfrid, wonderingly, “do you always speak of your sister in that bitter tone?”

“Am I really bitter? I have been called all sorts of things—by Virginia and others—but I can’t remember that that particular accusation was ever brought against me before. Perhaps it is out of a spirit of contradiction, and because two sweet people in one house might be rather too much of a good thing. You won’t deny that you think her sweet?”

It would have been impossible to deny that Lady Virginia looked so when she entered the room at this juncture, divesting herself of her sables and flinging them aside as she advanced. The keen air outside had brought a becoming color into her

cheeks, and she had that girlish, almost childish, appearance which was characteristic of her in her contented moods.

“Well,” she announced, after throwing down a pile of cushions before the fire and seating herself upon them, with her white, jewelled hands clasped round her knees, “I have been and seen and conquered. It wasn’t quite as easy as you might suppose either. If it had been possible to freeze me, a frozen woman I should have been; I was given plainly to understand that the young lady considered herself anybody’s equal and most people’s superior. She has changed her mind now, though; she is delighted with me. Well she may be; for I took all the pains in the world to be delightful, and I foresee that there won’t be much trouble with her in the future.”

“Do you actually mean to tell me,” asked Wilfrid, solemnly, “that you have brought Miss Power to believe in Home Rule?”

“Oh, not yet; but she acknowledges that one honest Home Ruler exists in the person of your humble servant, and she is coming to lunch with us the day after to-morrow. So are you. I asked the old gentleman; but he begged to be excused when he heard whom he would be expected to meet. He was so kind as to say that, although he was unable to agree with me, he could make allowance for my generous impulses; but he was afraid he might lose control over his temper in the presence of a man who was willing to make himself the accomplice of robbers and murderers for the sake of political advancement—meaning the member for the Heckingley

division. So, as I didn't particularly want him, I graciously let him off."

"Well," said Wilfrid, with a sigh, "you certainly are extraordinary!" He added presently, "I wonder why I am coming to luncheon the day after tomorrow."

By this time Lady Laura had risen and had slowly strolled out of the room, as she not unfrequently did on her sister's appearance. The latter replied:

"You are coming because you have been asked. Isn't that a sufficient reason?"

"Well, then, I wonder why I was asked?"

"Ah, that's more complicated! But if you prefer to remain away—"

"Oh, I'll come," said Wilfrid.

Lady Virginia had a charming laugh—low, clear, spontaneous, and conveying the impression that she was genuinely diverted.

"I thought you would," she remarked. "Taking one thing with another, it will be rather fun, I expect."

"*C'est selon!*" thought the member for the Heckingley division to himself.

But of course he was not going to miss that opportunity of meeting a lady to whom he felt that he had been the means of rendering an indirect service, and whom, as matters stood, he was unlikely to find frequent occasions of meeting. He had not very much to say to Nora—she had, so to speak, laid her finger upon his lips that afternoon in Warwick Crescent—but even to be allowed to sit at the same table with her would be something, he thought.

Somewhat better fortune than was implied in that

modest aspiration awaited him ; for, when the time came, he was instructed to seat himself at Lady Virginia's hospitable board beside the young actress, to whom everybody seemed eager to be introduced. The company, which included some distinguished members of divers political factions, was a numerous one. There was perhaps no other house in London where so heterogeneous a gathering could have been got together at so unpopular an hour, and doubtless the knowledge that she alone could do that sort of thing contributed to provide the clever little hostess with the fun which she had professed to anticipate. For the first ten minutes or so Nora was too much engaged in acknowledging the complimentary speeches which were addressed to her from all quarters to enter into conversation with her neighbor ; but at length his chance came, or was created for him, and he profited by it to say, in a low voice :

“ It is comforting and encouraging to see you here. Your prejudices are less insurmountable than you pretend, it seems.”

“ Oh, I give in !” she answered, laughing ; “ you may crow over me as much as you like. Of course, Lady Virginia is altogether in the wrong about Ireland, which she understands no better than you do ; but she has been so kind to me personally that I can't bear any ill will against her for being a Radical. After all, she is entitled to be what she pleases.”

“ And I ?” inquired Wilfrid. “ Is it fair that I should be punished for being what all manner of irresistible circumstances force me to be ?”

“ Who is trying to punish you, Mr. Elles ? If I had that pretension—but really I haven't—it would not be

on account of your Gladstonian convictions. When you talk about fairness, you should remember that I could pick a quarrel with you upon fairer grounds than that, if I wanted to quarrel."

"Haven't I apologized?"

"Yes; and you said at the same time that you maintained your opinion."

"Which, unless I am very much mistaken, is also Lady Virginia's opinion. Have you and she compared notes, I wonder, upon the subject of your noble patron?"

It must be owned that this was an exceedingly foolish, as well as provocative, speech to make, and that Wilfrid should have been satisfied to leave Nora's preservation from possible calumny in hands more adroit than his own; but it vexed him to think that she did not in the least understand the motives of her seductive hostess. She might even, for anything that he knew to the contrary, be misguided enough to imagine that a smart and ambitious lady was willing to welcome her into the family!

His indiscretion, however, met with no immediate retribution, Nora's attention being claimed elsewhere before she had time to reply. Somebody on the other side of the table wanted very much to know where Miss Power had acquired certain little tricks of manner, appertaining to her part in *The Ambassador's Wife*, which he declared to be wholly outside the capacity and experience of the average English actress; and thus a discussion was initiated upon the limitations of British histrionic art which was carried on without interruption until the ladies rose. Nora took her share in it modestly, but decisively, and her

remarks were received with sympathetic deference. She was perhaps going to be a social, as well as a theatrical, success; Lady Virginia seemed to wish that she should be, and one or two *grandes dames* who were present—the men, of course, did not count—showed an amiable disposition to take her up. Nothing could have been more satisfactory, and yet Wilfrid was not quite pleased. He would have liked Miss Power to gain social recognition in spite of her being an actress, not on account of that disabling circumstance.

But this was sheer hyper-sensitiveness, and more substantial reason to be sorry for her and for himself was in store for him in the drawing-room, after the coffee and cigarette interval. Everybody was going away; Nora, with the rest, was upon her feet and preparing to depart, when she caught sight of Wilfrid, and apparently recollected that she had something to say to him.

“Oh—about my noble patron, as you are pleased to call him,” she began. “It isn’t over and above flattering of you to insinuate that I am indebted to any one’s patronage; still it would be most ungrateful of me to deny that Lord Southfield put my foot upon the first rung of the ladder. I hope I am not ungrateful, and I also hope that you won’t attempt any more to make me so. Because any attempt of the sort will be absolutely useless.”

“I can’t unsay what I have said,” returned Wilfrid, stubbornly. “Gratitude is all very well, but—”

“But what? Do you think I don’t know that false and spiteful things are sure to be said by people who choose to consider Lord Southfield as you consider

him, my patron? The best answer, it seems to me—supposing it were worth while to make any answer—is that I am here to-day, and that I have been begged to return as often as I can spare the time.”

No doubt that would be an excellent answer, and Wilfrid was glad to think that it might, if necessary, be made. Nevertheless, he would fain have cautioned an inexperienced lady that there were other and more serious perils ahead than such as might be created by mere idle gossip. It being obviously out of the question to take so great a liberty, he only grunted; whereupon Nora defiantly continued:

“And I may as well tell you that I don’t for one moment believe Lord Southfield is the sort of person you make him out. Even if he were, he has been a better friend to us than—than other nominal friends of ours, and I prefer to speak and think of people as I find them.”

“So much for me!” muttered Wilfrid, when her back had been turned upon him. “Serves me right, I suppose, for meddling with what doesn’t concern me. All the same, it’s rather hard luck that what so nearly concerns her should be no concern of mine.”

CHAPTER XXIV

WILFRID'S PERPLEXITIES

LADY VIRGINIA stretched herself and sighed rather wearily, after her guests, with the exception of Wilfrid, had taken themselves off. She had been at some pains to keep them amused, and perhaps she was wondering—as she was apt to do on such occasions—whether it had been quite worth while.

“You were most of you horribly dull,” she remarked; “much duller than you would have been at dinner. So few people can stand the light of day! Miss Power bore the test pretty well, though, which is more than might have been expected of an actress. She is a nice sort of girl in her way, and I won't lose sight of her.”

“For a professed Radical you are wonderfully condescending,” said Wilfrid, with just that display of temper which her ladyship's speech had been intended to provoke, and which had the desired effect of amusing her. “Why do you talk as if a lady who has been forced, chiefly by Radical policy, to work for her living must have lost caste? As far as that goes, why do you uphold caste distinctions at all?”

This delighted Lady Virginia, who laughed merrily, and returned:

“Please don't bite my head off! What more can

I do than ask the girl to my house and introduce her to my friends? If you can think of anything more, kindly mention it, and I'll endeavor to oblige you. Personally, I don't care twopence whether a person is an actress or a duchess, so long as she doesn't bore me; only you must remember that Radicalism in politics doesn't necessarily imply a wish to abolish all social grades and shades."

"Socially speaking, Miss Power is as good as any of us," Wilfrid declared.

"Do you think so? Well, perhaps. Questions of that sort don't begin to matter until questions of marriage crop up, and I presume she doesn't want to marry one of us. Oh, I'll befriend her, and I may even find some fool of quality to marry her too. As I was saying the other night, her beauty and her talent ought to give her fine chances."

Wilfrid went away rather cross. Perhaps Lady Virginia understood all about it, and perhaps she didn't; in either case she would probably play the part that he wished her to play. But, surely, if Radicalism meant anything at all it meant that all descendants of Adam are equal, and that fashionable ladies have no business to assume airs of superiority in their relations with a lady who does not happen to be in their little set.

It is not always so easy to discover what Radicalism means, even in a political sense; and of this he was soon made aware after he had taken his seat for the first time in that historic House of which his uncle had been for many years a patient and deeply interested member. At that particular juncture it was commonly believed to mean, amongst other

things, the granting of autonomy to Ireland; and already signs were not wanting that the avowal of such a programme would entail the disruption of the great Liberal party. The debate on the Address did not, however, elicit from Wilfrid's leader the announcement which some young members, in the simplicity of their souls, had anticipated. To those inexperienced persons Mr. Gladstone offered a few words of advice. "I would tell them," said he, "of my own intention to keep my own counsel and reserve my own freedom until I see the occasion when there may be a prospect of public benefit in endeavoring to make a movement forward; and I will venture to recommend them, as an old parliamentary hand, to do the same."

The remainder of a speech the delivery of which was perhaps rather more admirable than its subject matter amounted merely to an invitation to Ministers to state what they proposed to do. The Chancellor of the Exchequer, in reply, complained of Mr. Gladstone's ambiguity, declared the determination of the Government to uphold the Union, and suggested that he and his colleagues should either receive the support of the majority or be relieved of the cares of office in the customary manner. That, Wilfrid thought, sounded at least straightforward, and when, after one or two unimportant speeches, Mr. Parnell rose, it seemed reasonable to expect that matters were about to be brought to a direct issue.

But the calm, inscrutable leader of the Irish party, though he spoke extremely well and with studied moderation, had not, when he sat down, made it clear whether he was in favor of maintaining the Union

or not. He, of course, advocated the self-government which more than five-sixths of the representatives of Ireland demanded; yet he avoided defining self-government, and confined himself to expressing his personal conviction that a satisfactory solution might be reached, provided that the question were approached on both sides of the House in a large and generous spirit. Some sparring between the Nationalists and the Ulster members followed, and the House adjourned after Lord Randolph Churchill had emphatically declared, on behalf of the Ministry, that no measure of local self-government which might be introduced for Ireland could possibly contain the germs of a separate Parliament.

Lady Virginia, who was present during the early part of the debate, had left long before the conscientious Wilfrid set out homeward, but he saw her the next day, when she called upon him to admire the skill with which the good cause was being handled.

“I like the impudence of the Tories in asking us to show our cards before the game begins!” said she.

“I’m afraid I can’t see very much to admire in finessing,” answered Wilfrid. “If we have a majority, as I suppose we have, and if our cause is a good one, as I am sure I hope it is, why shouldn’t we hoist our colors at once?”

“Oh, how dull you are!—or pretend to be. What would be the fun of a yacht race if there were no jockeying? And do you suppose that any human being would have the patience to sit at Westminster, through endless dreary debates, but for

the occasional exhilaration of sharpening his wits against somebody else's? Lord Salisbury is to go out of office when we choose, not when he chooses; and it will probably suit our purpose to let him stumble on as best he can until after Easter."

Whether these tactics were or were not in reality contemplated by the opposition, circumstances, aided by Mr. Jesse Collings, precluded, as everybody knows, their adoption. When, on the third day of the debate, the Chancellor of the Exchequer somewhat unexpectedly gave notice of the imminent introduction of a bill for the suppression of the National League and the protection of life and property in Ireland, it seemed not unlikely that the Ministerial defeat might take place upon the true issue between the Conservative and Liberal parties; but an arrangement which would have been more or less agreeable to those in power was naturally deprecated by those who were destined to succeed them; so precedence was accorded to the symbolic cow, with her concomitant three acres, so frequently alluded to upon platforms in those days. The cow, backed by the member for the Heckingley Division and seventy-eight others, cantered gayly in, and far-sighted Liberals were enabled to take note (for future mention to their constituents) of the fact that sympathy for the agricultural laborer was not to be looked for on the Tory benches. Some of them may likewise have been glad to think that in voting for Mr. Jesse Collings's amendment they had committed themselves to no support of their leader's as yet unknown Irish policy.

Quitting the House soon after the announcement

of the numbers, Wilfrid found himself rubbing elbows with Mr. Fitzpatrick, who accosted him in a very friendly manner, and congratulated him upon the victory which his side had just won.

“Well,” said Wilfrid, “I presume you, on your side, are not inconsolable at being beaten.”

“My dear sir, we’re overjoyed. Perhaps it wasn’t in the highest degree chivalrous to kick us out upon a side issue; but never mind that. Out we go; and now, at last, you will have to tell your allies in plain terms what reward you propose to offer them. Nothing short of their pound of flesh is likely to satisfy those allies of yours, I suspect, and how the dickens you are going to carve it out of our vile Irish landowning bodies, with a powerful contingent of your own English adherents dead against you, I don’t at present see. However, that’s your affair; we shall watch your struggles with disrespectful interest.”

“I don’t pretend to understand all the intricacies of parliamentary warfare,” observed Wilfrid, “but it appears to me that this doesn’t bind us down to Home Rule.”

“Oh, you’re bound down, safe enough; it stands to reason that you can’t afford to do without eighty-six Irish votes. On the other hand, a scheme for the dismemberment of the Empire will inevitably send every honest Liberal over to us. It’s not a pleasant predicament to be in, but, *vous l’avez voulu!*”

“I may have formed too high an opinion of myself,” said Wilfrid, meekly, “but I really did imagine that I was an honest man.”

“I don’t doubt it for a moment. And that is why

I look forward to the pleasure of walking into the same lobby with you on the day when Mr. Gladstone's Home Rule Bill is knocked on the head."

Was it so certain that Mr. Gladstone would frame a Home Rule Bill, or that, if he did, it would be knocked on the head? Wilfrid, in the meantime, shook his own and tacitly declined further discussion. He had heard, he believed, all that could be urged by way of argument on both sides, and the unlucky thing was that neither side had wholly convinced him.

"But that would be so shockingly discreditable to your intelligence if it were true," Lady Virginia, to whom he very shortly found occasion to say as much, declared, "that one is glad to recognize your insincerity. Of course you are really in favor of Home Rule; you only mean that you don't like the idea of helping to propel Mr. Power towards the Bankruptcy Court."

"Oh, is that what I mean?"

"Unmistakably it is; and you might have a little more common-sense. You ought to know that the landlords won't and can't be plundered. They may deserve it, but they have far too many friends in this country to get their deserts, and you may depend upon it that ample provision will be made for them. If Mr. Power gets twenty years' purchase, as he probably will, his income will be larger, I imagine, as well as more certain than it is at present."

"Perhaps. But the Home Rule Bill, if there is to be one, won't deal with that point, will it? And I should have thought that it was rather doubtful

whether he would get twenty years' purchase out of an Irish legislative body."

Lady Virginia made no reply ; she appeared to be thinking about something else. Presently she said :

"Do you know what the girl said to me about you the other day ?"

"How should I ? What did she say ?"

"She said you were an amiable man. Where she picked up that rather impertinent phrase I can't think ; but she evidently intended it to be handed on, so here it is for you."

"I suppose I am very dense," returned Wilfrid, with a slightly heightened color ; "but I don't quite see what it means."

"Oh, it means a lot of things. It means, to begin with, that she believes you admire her. By the way, do you admire her ?"

"I think her pretty and clever," answered Wilfrid, curtly.

"So do I. Well, then, it means that she doesn't particularly admire you just at present. Finally, it means that she understands perfectly well what your motives were for introducing her to me, and that she would appreciate your many virtues more highly if a tendency to mind your own business were one of them."

"You asked me to introduce her to you," said Wilfrid, determined not to be put out of countenance. "I confess that I was glad to be asked—for the reason which you and she seem to have been clever enough to guess."

"You justify her description of you," remarked Lady Virginia, laughing. "In return, let me confess

that I wasn't so clever as to guess the truth unaided and alone. I got it out of Laura, who, I saw, was in your confidence. Set your mind at rest, so far as I am concerned. I am almost as amiable as you are, and my brother's amiability shall, if possible, be reserved for others. All the same, you had better realize two things. In the first place, you'll get no thanks from the young woman, whatever happens; in the second place, I can't undertake to work miracles. It is very evident to me that Southfield has fascinated her—he can be fascinating when he likes, as more than one young woman has found out to her cost—and if she is bent upon making a fool of herself—” Lady Virginia shrugged her shoulders and left her sentence unfinished.

The interruption caused by the entrance of Mr. Lethbridge, when the dialogue had been carried thus far, was doubtless opportune, and in a few minutes Wilfrid took his leave. It did not soothe his somewhat exacerbated nerves to be clapped on the shoulder, at the moment of emerging into the street, by a gentleman who had just stepped out of a hansom, and who said, in friendly accents :

“Hullo, Elles ! been consulting Virginia about the parliamentary crisis ? Sorry you couldn't come and lend us a hand with the snipe. We had a rare good time of it, first and last ; but that's all over now, and London must have its turn.”

“Do you think of staying long in London ?”

He was conscious that his tone of voice implied “I hope you don't”; but no lack of cordiality seemed to be divined by Lord Southfield, who answered frankly :

“I never look far ahead. As a general rule, I hate town; but one or two things may keep me here just now. I have come up as much as anything else for the sake of seeing our little friend Miss Power, who writes that she is getting on like a house on fire. You’ve been to the St. Martin’s, of course?”

Wilfrid, as he walked away, tried to derive some consolation from Lord Southfield’s language, which certainly did not sound very much like that of a lover. But to set against this there was the unwelcome fact that Nora was, by his admission, in correspondence with him. Upon the whole, the prospect was not reassuring—was perhaps even less so than if danger had presented itself in cruder shape. Moreover, it was not pleasant to know that he had been stigmatized, in acknowledgment of his well-meant efforts, as “amiable.”

CHAPTER XXV

“FOR THE FUTURE GOVERNMENT OF IRELAND”

NOT with impunity—or, at all events, not with immunity—can one be a young M.P. of attractive exterior and considerable personal property. Wilfrid at this time found that his days and nights were occupied with many unavoidable private engagements, in addition to those imposed upon him by his duty to his constituents, and thus he was prevented from seeing as much as he would fain have seen of the very small group of persons who alone, among the vast crowd which hemmed him in, appealed to his interest and sympathies. But from time to time he met one or two of them, and from time to time he learned, by scraps of casual intelligence which came to his ears, that they formed in literal truth, as well as in his thoughts, a compact group.

“From all that I hear,” he remarked, with a touch of impatience, to Lady Laura Mayne, whose neighbor he chanced to be at a dinner-party one evening, “your prediction is not very likely to be fulfilled. Do you remember telling me rather confidently what would be the result of your sister’s taking up Miss Power?”

“That Southfield would drop her?” asked Lady Laura. “Oh yes, I remember quite well. So he will.”

“Yet it appears that she and he have been constantly coming across each other in Tilney Street of late.”

“Of course they have; what else did you expect Virginia to do? Miss Power, don’t you see, is her friend—almost one of her set—and must be approached with respect, if she is to be approached at all.”

“I should hope so!”

“Well, but Southfield doesn’t care very much about ladies who have to be approached in that way. As far as I can see, it will all work out according to programme, and Virginia, who never makes a mistake, evidently expects that it will. Do you admire this diamond and emerald bangle?”

“I have been admiring it ever since we sat down,” answered Wilfrid.

“Presented to me, the other day, by Virginia, as a small reward for my having been sharp enough to put her on the scent. She always recognizes her obligations, and if she can’t give you jewellery, I dare say she will show you some other small mark of favor which you will value even more. She will do the handsome thing by Miss Power too—very likely find a husband for her by the time that Southfield has been cajoled into gulping down his unavoidable Bland.”

“You are rather cynical,” said Wilfrid.

“One hears that term used so often that a few days ago, in an unusual fit of curiosity, I asked Tom who the original Cynics were. He said he wasn’t a walking encyclopædia, but roughly speaking the Cynics were a sect who took ‘don’t care a damn’ for

their motto. That sounds so like me that I suppose I must have been one of them for years without knowing it. If you were to join us—”

“I am afraid I couldn’t,” said Wilfrid.

“No. I’m afraid you couldn’t—and, after all, it’s less important for you than it is for me. All the same, you would be a good deal happier if you were to give up caring about things which aren’t worth caring for.”

Wilfrid did not invite her to explain. Whether Nora Power was worth caring for or not, it was assuredly beyond him to help caring for her, and he was to some extent comforted by what he had just been told; but perhaps it was not to Nora that the allusion had been meant to apply.

Meanwhile, he was educating himself to care a little more about politics in their party aspects than he had hitherto done. He could not but perceive how desirable it was that he should learn to take an interest in the vicissitudes belonging to the career which he was destined to follow, and those were days unusually propitious for such a purpose. The newly formed Ministry, which many of Mr. Gladstone’s former colleagues had declined or had not been invited to join, were virtually pledged to bring in a Home Rule Bill—Mr. John Morley’s appointment to the Irish Secretaryship was held to be conclusive upon that point—and how far the ostensible supporters of the government would respond to the crack of the whip when the critical moment should arrive was beginning to be a really interesting question to themselves and others. The revolt of the Whigs had been foreseen; what looked more serious

was the threatened defection of certain Radicals, in whose ranks—there really was no knowing—the member for the Heckingley division might possibly be numbered. There was no knowing, because no information had been vouchsafed either to him or to more important persons than he; nor did he mean to surrender his right of private judgment by making promises in the dark. Consequently it behooved him to get up facts and figures—a dry, wearisome, discouraging task, which left him but few play-hours.

Once, when he had a spare evening, he went again to see *The Ambassador's Wife*, and perceived by the crowded condition of the house that the piece had as yet lost nothing of its popularity. Towards the close of the evening Southfield sauntered in, and seated himself at the end of the second row of stalls. He wore—or Wilfrid imagined that he did—a somewhat irritating air of proprietorship, and there could not be the slightest doubt that when Nora stepped before the curtain to make her acknowledgments, she addressed a special smile and bow to the founder of her fortunes. He jumped up immediately afterwards and shouldered his way out in advance of the dispersing audience. It might fairly be presumed that he was going behind. A lady of Wilfrid's acquaintance wanted to know whether there was any truth in the rumor that Lord Southfield was going to marry “that charming Miss Power.”

“It would be almost a pity, wouldn't it? Although they say she is quite a lady by birth, and his sister, I believe, has her to dinner and that sort of thing, as if she approved.”

“I don’t think,” answered Wilfrid, “that his sister would be very likely to approve of such a match.”

“And you, of course, are such a friend of Lady Virginia’s that if there were anything in it you would be sure to have heard. Besides, it is an open secret that she means her brother to marry money. Well, then, I wonder that, for the girl’s sake, she doesn’t stop this.”

“Stop what?” Wilfrid inquired.

“Oh, the flirtation—to use a mild term. Mild terms, unfortunately, haven’t been exactly suitable to Lord Southfield’s by-gone flirtations, and if there were a young actress whom I wished to befriend, the last thing that I should dream of doing would be to encourage an intimacy between her and him.”

“There is a good-natured and an ill-natured way of looking at everything,” Wilfrid was uncivil enough to remark. “Good-natured people might think—and they would be right, too—that Lady Virginia was doing her best to shield Miss Power from calumny. Anyhow, that is her affair.”

“But, my dear Mr. Elles, it becomes my affair from the moment that I am invited to meet the girl. She may be, and I hope she is, as innocent as she is pretty; only she can’t, in her position, afford to be talked about—and really one has to be careful nowadays. I have grown-up daughters, you must remember.”

Wilfrid might have retorted that she had taken very good care not to let him forget that fact; he might also have reminded her that, if report was to be trusted, her own youth had not been marked by the excessive dread of possible contamination which

appeared to characterize her maturer years. But it was better to close his lips tightly, to avoid making a fool of himself, and to get away. The worst of it was that the good woman was quite right, and that he entirely agreed with her.

How long he would have had the strength of mind to resist an overwhelming temptation to betake himself to Warwick Crescent, and invite the rebuff which officious interference merits, it is impossible to say, if he had not felt convinced that Lady Virginia knew what she was about, and if he had not been immersed, day and night, in the tedious researches aforesaid. To these he stuck with obstinate tenacity — finding, no doubt, in fatigue some equivalent for oblivion; and if, at the end of all, Mr. Power would still have declared that he knew nothing about Ireland, he did at least make considerable additions to his stock of historical and statistical information.

He flattered himself that he was fairly well primed when, after repeated postponements, the eventful day arrived on which his leader was to announce the much-talked-of Home Rule Bill to an expectant legislature. That it was to be a measure for granting a more or less independent Parliament to Ireland was no longer disputed. Mr. Chamberlain and Mr. Trevelyan had resigned office rather than associate themselves with it, the terms Unionist and Separatist had already come into common use, and everybody was conscious that the old party divisions which for so long had granted alternate leases of power to progressive and quiescent ministries were in danger of obliteration. Wilfrid, like everybody else who

wished to obtain a seat, rushed down to the House at an hour when he was usually in bed, and by eleven o'clock not a single place remained unsecured. Some two dozen chairs were subsequently placed upon the floor of the House for the accommodation of members; belated arrivals were fain to stand or to seek admission to the upper galleries.

The scene when at last the Prime Minister entered was a striking and memorable one. He was, of course, received with tumultuous applause by his supporters, and the dense packing of the inadequate chamber gave this applause the appearance of being wellnigh unanimous. Yet it was not so. The old man, who stood by the table surveying his audience with the fire of undying youth in those luminous eyes of his, had already been forsaken by all the more influential among his colleagues of former years; at the close of his career he rose, virtually alone, to proclaim that he had broken finally with the past and to bring in a bill "to amend the provisions for the future government of Ireland." Right or wrong, patriotic or unpatriotic, he could not by any impartial spectator be refused the tribute of admiration due to courage. So, at all events, Wilfrid, who was tolerably impartial, thought; for the vulgar theory, which attributed this veteran's change of front to mere ambition and greed for office, might surely be disregarded.

The young member, therefore, was prepared to be charmed, if not swept away, by an oratory which had swayed many a wavering politician within the walls of Westminster, and multitudes outside them. But after the exordium, which was certainly fine and

splendidly delivered, he began to feel a little disappointed. Even the exordium, with its unfortunate allusion to certain continental experiments in the direction of dual government which were not believed to have resulted in conspicuous success, was somewhat short of satisfactory, and from the moment that details began to be stated the empiricism of the whole scheme became manifest to one who was fresh from a laborious study of details. Wilfrid, if not exactly critical by temperament, was cool-headed; words, however eloquent and impassioned, had no power of blinding him to hard facts, and he could not see how this measure, as presented, was to be made to work. The exclusion of the Irish members from the Imperial Parliament; the control of the police, which was to be provisionally denied, it appeared, to the new Legislature; above all, the financial arrangements, which, though rather hard to follow, sounded anything but conclusive—all these points evidently opened the door to endless dissensions. There remained, to be sure, what was perhaps the greatest difficulty of all, the question of the purchase and sale of land; and this, it had been announced, was to be made the subject of a separate bill, to be introduced in a week's time. Judgment, consequently, might for the time being be held in abeyance. “Only, as far as we have gone,” thought Wilfrid to himself, “it doesn't seem to me that we have got much beyond the declaration of a principle.”

Possibly it had not been Mr. Gladstone's aim to get very much beyond that; for he alluded to the happy effects which might be expected to follow

“free and full discussion,” and he appealed to his hearers to “rely less upon merely written stipulations and more upon those better stipulations which are written on the heart and mind of man.” He resumed his seat, after having spoken for three hours and a half, during which time it may well be doubted whether he had won over a solitary fresh adherent to his views.

He was followed, after an interval, by Mr. Trevelyan with a personal explanation, accompanied by sundry obvious criticisms upon the proposed measure; then came Mr. Parnell, with acrid denunciations of the previous speaker, and qualified approval of the bill; finally, the adjournment was moved by Mr. Chamberlain, who, it was understood, would also have a personal explanation to offer on the resumption of the debate.

Lady Virginia Lethbridge, descending from the ladies' gallery, whence she had been a deeply interested spectator of the proceedings, drove the weary member of the Heckingley division away with her in her brougham.

“Magnificent!” she exclaimed. “Now, don't say that it wasn't, or I will stop the carriage at once and turn you out into the mud.”

“It was magnificent,” answered Wilfrid; “but it was not—not business. At least, I am afraid it won't prove so. I have been trying to work out some of those financial figures, and—”

“Good gracious! what have you to do with stupid sums in arithmetic? The important thing is that the greatest man in England has done what no English Minister ever dared to do before, and

has acknowledged the right of Ireland to govern herself.”

“If he were the greatest man that ever lived, he couldn’t compel two and two to make five,” observed Wilfrid, rather obstinately. “But let us wait for the Land Purchase Bill.”

“Are you going on like this?” Lady Virginia inquired.

“I don’t understand.”

“Because if you are we shall quarrel. And then you will be sorry. It will be my duty and my desire to make you sorry. Who helped you into Parliament, pray? Who guided your hesitating steps into the right path? Who has done all manner of kind things for you in public and in private life? And now you reward me by cavilling and throwing cold water!”

“I will be good,” Wilfrid promised. “What do you want me to do?”

Lady Virginia laughed.

“For the moment, I want you to come and partake of the refreshment which we both need. After all, so long as you vote straight when the time comes, I won’t forbid you to grumble a little now and then. Only you are to reserve your grumblings for my private ear, please.”

Wilfrid assented. It seemed unnecessary and inopportune to mention that there was a possibility of his not voting with his party when the time should come.

CHAPTER XXVI

BILL NUMBER TWO

IF things were as easy as they generally look at the first glance, this "pleasing, anxious being" would, no doubt, be intolerably dull. It is perhaps pleasing chiefly on account of the ceaseless anxiety which attends it and the difficulties whereby it keeps our physical and mental powers in working order; so that we really ought not to complain of being baffled and worsted, since combat of one kind or another is our destiny and our joy.

With the above profoundly philosophical reflection Wilfrid endeavored to console himself while listening attentively to the second night's debate upon the Government of Ireland Bill. The problem did not seem to be such a very hard one. A certain section of her Majesty's subjects demanded, through the medium of five-sixths of their representatives, to be allowed to govern themselves; they did not expect or ask for independence; they only objected to alien and unsympathetic domination. Now, seeing that alien and unsympathetic domination had been forced upon them for seven centuries without any sort of success, a plain man might well assume that compliance with a request which had five-sixths of a nation behind it, and which could not in itself be

called unreasonable, was the simplest and surest method of converting disaffection into loyalty. Yet here were Mr. Chamberlain and Lord Hartington arguing — and arguing very forcibly too — to prove that no method could be less simple, less sure, or less safe.

The former orator, while explaining the causes which had brought about his resignation, labored under something of a disadvantage through being promptly forbidden by his late chief to refer to the provisions of the Land Purchase Bill, which was not yet before the House; nevertheless, he was able to point out defects in the measure under discussion which seemed amply sufficient to justify him in refusing to vote for it. Lord Hartington, who at the outset had declined to join the Administration, was even more convincing. At all events, he seemed so to one who had been brought up like other Englishmen of his class, in traditions of discipline, and who could not but recognize, now that they were set before him, the complicated and disastrous results which might follow a dissolution of the Act of Union. Still, and in spite of all, the fact remained that Ireland never had been, and probably never would be, coerced or cajoled into hugging her chains. The whole dilemma was utterly discouraging, and every way out of it appeared to lead only into a *cul-de-sac*. Therefore, Wilfrid was fain to seek comfort in the abstract musings above mentioned, and to thank his stars that he, at any rate, was responsible for nothing beyond his personal, insignificant vote.

On which side that vote ought to be cast remained uncertain to him after two more nights of

exhaustive disputation ; only his mind was made up that conscience, not his constituents, should dictate his course of action. He had, to be sure, been returned to Parliament as a follower of Mr. Gladstone, if not as an actual Home Ruler ; but he had never pledged himself to support a scheme which had not been submitted to the country at the general election, nor did he intend to surrender his right of private judgment to anybody. If in the sequel he should find himself compelled to oppose the party to which he belonged, nothing would afford him greater pleasure than to give up his seat.

The case, however, did not immediately present itself, the bill being read a first time without a division, after its author had summed up the debate with a reply to his various critics which neither lacked energy nor closed the door against possible conciliation. His project, he remarked, had many enemies, but not a single rival. It must, therefore, continue to hold the field, and until it could be so far altered or improved as to commend itself to a majority of the House and thus pass into law, all other legislation must of necessity fall into arrear.

“And a very good thing, too !” was Mr. Fitzpatrick’s subsequent comment upon this threat. “If we poor Irishmen have done you fellows no other service, we have at least preserved you for some time from having your lives legislated out of you. That irrepressible leader of yours is bound to be always attacking something or somebody ; aren’t you glad that he is busy now going for the Irish landlords instead of the English ones ? And hadn’t

you better give yourselves a little more breathing time now that he has provided you with such a capital excuse for dismissing him by committing himself to an impossible design? You'll allow that it is impossible."

Wilfrid made the same reply that he had made to Lady Virginia:

"Let us wait for the Land Purchase Bill."

"Oh, the Land Purchase Bill!" returned Mr. Fitzpatrick, laughing; "it is easy to prophesy what sort of a thing that will be. An offer which no landlord can accept, and which will enable the Government to say to us, after our estates have been confiscated: 'Well, we did the best we could for you. You turned up your noses at half a loaf, and it isn't our fault if you have no bread to-day.'"

But the proposals which were announced three days later did not appear to Wilfrid so illiberal as to warrant any instant turning up of noses on the part of those for whose benefit they were stated to have been framed. The land-owners were to have the option of being bought out at the price of twenty years' purchase on the judicial rent—which sounded pretty well. There were, however, conditions and drawbacks. The above price might be augmented or diminished, and applications might be rejected altogether; the medium between vendor and purchaser was to be a "State Authority" appointed by the Irish Parliament; there was to be a Receiver-General, nominated by the Imperial Government, through whose hands all Irish revenues were to pass, and the rent-charge was to be the first charge thereon. Finally, the sum to be advanced by the nation for the purpose

of carrying out the purchase scheme was fixed at £50,000,000. Now, as Wilfrid's reading had led him to conclude that the total value of rented agricultural land in Ireland at twenty years' purchase could not fall very far short of £170,000,000, it was obvious that the sum in question could not possibly suffice, supposing that every landlord saw fit to avail himself of the offer made to him. But indeed the whole plan, as it stood, scarcely produced the effect of being serious. It was coldly received by the Nationalist members and laughed at by Mr. Fitzpatrick and those who sat near him, while representatives of the British taxpayer on both sides of the House raised ominous murmurs. As for the member for the Heckingley division, who had begun by being favorably impressed, he ended by indulging in a gentle shrug of the shoulders. Not by such means as these were dissentient Liberals likely to be tempted back into the fold!

No division was challenged, and the House adjourned between one and two o'clock in the morning. In the damp, chilly darkness of Palace Yard Wilfrid secured a hansom, and was in the act of stepping into it when he was familiarly accosted by a person whom he certainly would not have expected to encounter in such a place and at such a time of night.

"Oh, I've been listening to you," Lord Southfield said, in reply to some expressions of surprise—"heard you out to the bitter end, with occasional intervals of slumber. What infernally dreary speakers you are, most of you! Worse even than we are, I should say; though I don't often patronize our branch of the business. However, I promised to be present this time, and I'm a man of my word. I shall be able to report

that there was nothing worth reporting, except Chamberlain's speech. It struck me that he let your revered leader have it pretty straight, and that you're done for this journey, if you weren't done for before."

"To report to whom?" Wilfrid inquired.

But the question was really superfluous; for it was easy to guess at whose instigation Lord Southfield had consented to grace the Peers' gallery on this occasion, and indeed his lordship was not concerned to make any mystery about the matter.

"Miss Power would have liked to be here herself," he answered, "and I believe my sister had a place for her; but professional duties stood in the way. So I said I would come and take notes, as a corrective to Virginia's, which couldn't be relied upon for impartiality. How do you feel about the thing yourself by this time? A bit sick, eh?"

"I never expected to find the House of Commons anything but sickening," replied Wilfrid, rather petulantly, "and so far I have not been disappointed. As for the bill, I don't know; I haven't had time to think it out yet." He could not refrain—though he wished to refrain—from adding: "I suppose you see a good deal of Miss Power now. She is prospering, I hope?"

"Oh, bless your soul, yes! She's a star—a comet—whatever you like to call it. As soon as this piece stops running she ought to get a much better engagement. In fact, I may say that I can get her a much better one. What are you doing now? Will you—"

"I'm going home to bed," Wilfrid answered, somewhat discourteously cutting short the invitation which appeared to be on its way; "I'm less fortunate than you. I haven't had any sleep yet to-night."

It occurred to him later that Lord Southfield might have intentionally waylaid him, and might have had something to say which it would have been just as well to hear; yet what more could the man have told him? He had already been informed that Nora's patron considered it his business to enter into future engagements on her behalf; he had already been given to understand that her patron was her slave, to the extent of attending a sitting of the House of Commons at her behest. The remainder of the story told itself. Events were not arranging themselves in accordance with prediction; Lady Virginia and Lady Laura did not know what they were about—or, at least, if they did, they had only their own selfish ends in view, and cared little what might be the fate of this or that actress, so long as their brother behaved himself after a satisfactorily conventional and dishonorable fashion.

Wilfrid, therefore, failed to obtain the repose which was his due that night, and on the next day but one, being Sunday, he carried his various troubles and perplexities to Tilney Street, where he was rather unreasonably disgusted to find himself one of a large bevy of visitors, which included Sir Samuel and Miss Bland. Sir Samuel, when he entered, was complacently holding forth in accents of platform oratory upon the political situation.

“I do not in the least regret the secession of the Whigs; for a long time past I have regarded the Whigs as a source of weakness rather than of strength to our party. Mr. Chamberlain will probably see before long that, in the nature of things, he can command no following. We shall welcome him

back, if he chooses to acknowledge the error of his ways; if not, we shall do very well without him. To my mind, the two measures now laid before us are statesman-like, adequate, and workable—or very nearly so. Even should they be rejected by the present House of Commons, which I do not anticipate—”

“Will he continue to drown conversation in this way much longer, do you suppose?” whispered Wilfrid to Lady Laura, at whose elbow he had found a vacant chair.

“Until his breath gives out, I expect,” she replied, yawning as usual. “Why not? He likes it, and nobody seems to mind.”

“I mind,” muttered Wilfrid, “and I should have thought that you would. Don’t you long to stuff a sofa-cushion down his throat?”

“Never, when his daughter is present. Looking at her, one sees what awful possibilities are in the blood, and one feels quite grateful to him for being no worse than he is.”

Wilfrid thought this rather hard upon poor Miss Bland, who at least could not be called loquacious, and whose inane fixed smile did not infuriate him.

“I am so sorry Southfield hasn’t turned up this afternoon,” Wilfrid presently overheard Lady Virginia saying to her. “He would certainly have come if he had known that you were going to be here.”

Miss Bland simpered and grew unbecomingly red in the face. Was it possible that the unfortunate woman could swallow an assertion so palpably mendacious! In any case, if it was in the hope of seeing

her lukewarm suitor that she waited until everybody, except Wilfrid, had gone away, she waited in vain; and after she and her father had at length taken their leave, Lady Virginia exclaimed:

“I owe Southfield one for this! He swore by all he held most sacred that he wouldn’t throw me over again. Where on earth can he be?”

“In Warwick Crescent, perhaps,” suggested Wilfrid, dryly. “He frequently is to be found there, I understand.”

“Well, don’t look at me in that accusing way,” returned Lady Virginia, who was tired and rather cross. “There isn’t going to be a scandal; I will answer for that. But I really can’t answer for anything else. If the girl is such a goose as to think that he means matrimony, that is no fault of mine. I have discreetly warned her, I have ostentatiously taken her under my wing—what more can I do? from my point of view she is really useful, don’t you see, in her present capacity, because she is keeping Southfield out of mischief. As a general rule, he can’t spend a week in London without doing something flagrantly shocking—and the Blands, I believe, are Quakers, or Baptists, or something. What is it that the Blands are, Laura?”

But the younger sister, as her habit was, had already vanished, and thus Wilfrid was enabled to administer to the elder the severe rebuke which he conceived that her behavior merited. Her methods, he said, were marked by a cold, calculating heartlessness of which she ought to be ashamed.

“I am neither heartless nor ashamed,” her ladyship declared. “Charity begins at home, and my

first duty is to my brother ; but when once I have settled his affairs for him—which I mean to do very soon now—I will turn my attention to Miss Power, whom I don't blame at all for thinking that it would be rather nice to be Lady Southfield. Silly of her, perhaps, but not unnatural, and compensations shall be forthcoming in due time. Oh, the Irish landed interest isn't being neglected ; even you must acknowledge that. Or don't you acknowledge it ?”

Truth compelled Wilfrid to reply that he doubted whether Irish land-owners would derive, or were intended to derive, much substantial benefit from the Land Purchase Bill. So then it became his turn to be lectured, and nothing more was said about Nora and Lord Southfield. Nothing more, indeed, remained to be said ; nor, when he left Tilney Street, did he feel reassured respecting any of the points upon which he had fondly looked for reassurance.

CHAPTER XXVII

UNIMAGINABLE

LADY VIRGINIA always went over to Paris at Easter, and always managed to be accompanied by a small party of friends whom she thought likely to add to her amusement on the other side of the Channel. Possibly it was because she did not think Wilfrid Elles likely to promote amusement on this occasion that she refrained from requesting the favor of his society; but she had a less unflattering reason than that to offer him.

“Of course you can’t take a holiday—poor you!” said she, compassionately; “your holiday task for the recess is plain and unavoidable. Well, give my love to the good people at Heckingley, and tell them not to bother their heads about any nonsense that they may happen to read in leading articles. The party will stick to its chief, though a few weak-kneed brethren may fall away; the cause is sure to triumph, and their member will faithfully carry out the mandate intrusted to him of voting for Irish autonomy. I don’t think I would tell them more than that, if I were you, because one doesn’t quite know yet what modifications and compromises may become necessary after the second reading.”

Wilfrid felt anything but certain that he could

truthfully tell them as much ; nor, as a matter of fact, had he accepted any mandate to vote for Home Rule. However, he went down, as in duty bound, to address his constituents, and had no great trouble with them. He deemed it only right to announce that he must reserve complete liberty of action, and that the twin measures brought forward did not seem to merit unconditional support as they stood ; but although this statement evoked some murmurs, his meetings passed off, upon the whole, smoothly enough. Perhaps, like himself, the electorate at large had scarcely made up its mind, and no doubt a good many reflective persons wondered how certain politicians whom Mr. Gladstone had for so long vehemently denounced, and had even sent to prison, could suddenly have become fit to undertake the government of a turbulent and distracted country. But it was not very easy to discover what was the real drift of that fluctuating quantity known as public opinion, nor, at the end of the recess, could the representatives of either party boast confidently of being backed thereby. A letter addressed by Mr. Gladstone to the electors of Midlothian, in which the "classes" were accused of endeavoring, after the manner of their kind, to impede all good and useful legislation, seemed to produce no great effect, beyond that of widening the breach between him and sundry of his former colleagues.

Returning to London in the early days of May, Wilfrid at once found himself surrounded by a host of other Parliament men and their wives, whose conversation was not particularly interesting. Most

of them appeared to him to be curiously ignorant, and the various rumors which they poured into his ear sounded hardly worth listening to. However, they did not—or perhaps it was their wives who did not—confine themselves exclusively to political rumors, and thus they had at least one thing to say which interested their hearer a good deal more than it pleased him. Everybody, it seemed, was talking about Lord Southfield's conspicuous and undisguised attentions to the popular actress at the St. Martin's Theatre, and everybody was wondering how that affair would end. To speak more correctly, nobody doubted that it could have—or already had—but one termination; wonder was reserved for Lady Virginia Lethbridge's conduct in the matter, and a little for that of Mr. Power, who, it was charitably assumed, must be ignorant of what was going on.

Wilfrid contrived, not without difficulty, to hold his tongue while gossip of this nature took place in his presence; but he could not bring himself to go quite the length of disregarding it. He felt, indeed, that he was not entitled to do so, and that Miss Power ought at least to be warned of what was being said behind her back. If—as was more than probable—her informant should be snubbed for his pains, none the less would he have discharged one of those disagreeable duties which no true friend has a right to shirk.

It was doubtless through some unconscious obedience to the above-mentioned call of duty that the hero of this narrative was pensively wandering in the neighborhood of Warwick Crescent one warm and brilliantly fine afternoon. He had not set out

with any intention of calling upon Miss Power (who had told him long ago that she was not at home on week-days), but thinking about her had drawn him insensibly in the direction of her abode, and, now that he was so near, he had half a mind to ring at her door and take his chance of what might be in store for him. .

What, to begin with, was in store for him was the surprise of suddenly hearing her voice close behind his shoulder. And her voice, he immediately noticed, was the old Rathfinnan voice, not that which he had learned to associate of late with London and the theatre and other unsuitable environments.

“What are you doing such a long way from Pall Mall and Belgrave Square?” she asked. “Are you simply taking a walk, like me, because it is such glorious weather?”

He took off his hat and clasped for a moment the gloved hand which she extended to him. She looked fresh and beaming and adorably pretty. No doubt she was also very well dressed; but his eyes had never been educated to appreciate niceties of costume. He replied by bestowing upon the weather the praise to which it was entitled, and added that, having nothing particular to do, he had strolled across the Park and through Kensington Gardens. “After which, I suppose, a spirit in my feet must have led me—who knows how?—to a quarter of the town where I certainly didn’t expect to meet with such a stroke of good luck as this.”

She evidently did not consider his quotation impertinent; for she smiled, and rejoined:

“It must be confessed that that spirit doesn’t get into your feet so often as to be inconvenient. How long is it since you last honored Warwick Crescent with a visit?”

“I should have been in Warwick Crescent with monotonous regularity every Sunday since that day,” Wilfrid declared, “if I could have flattered myself that my presence would not be inconvenient; but you intimated so very plainly to me that it would! Besides—”

“What besides?”

He sighed.

“Well, if I had come, I should only have had to say some disagreeable things. I believe, with your permission, I am going to say them now.”

But there was no putting Nora out of temper that afternoon. They had been walking along, side by side, and were now within sight of her dwelling.

“Come in and say them, then,” she returned, quite good-humoredly. “I know in advance what they are; but never mind! You will feel easier when you have had your breath out, and I am in a mood to submit to anything. In the first place, the sights and sounds and smells of spring always intoxicate me with delight; then Lord Southfield has just sent us a whole basketful of flowers which had been forwarded to him from the dear old Rathfinnan garden; thirdly and lastly, my salary is to be doubled. So now is your time to call me any names that you may think appropriate.”

Thus encouraged, Wilfrid soon acquitted himself of his task. Sitting in the little drawing-room, to which she admitted him as a matter of course and

without any apparent idea that conventionality might demand the presence of a chaperon, he said what he had to say, and was not interrupted. When he had quite done, Nora only remarked :

“It really doesn’t signify.”

“But it does signify! That is just what I can’t get you to understand.”

“I assure you it doesn’t—and I perfectly understand. When I took to the stage I foresaw that there would be certain troubles and drawbacks. As matters have fallen out, they haven’t proved to be nearly as serious as I anticipated. Lady Virginia, don’t you see, is a tower of strength. You are not fair to Lord Southfield, whom I think I know rather better than you do, and to whom we are more deeply indebted than you realize, perhaps. Gossip is inevitable; the only way of dealing with it is to take no notice of it. And,” she continued, with a smile, “you need not be—as I see you are—alarmed about me. I should not be in the least danger even if Lord Southfield’s designs were what you quite mistakenly suppose them to be.”

Wilfrid became a little red in the face. She had certainly relieved him, and yet—he was not altogether pleased that his thoughts should have been divined, nor did he altogether like to hear her alluding to them with so much composure. It was necessary to apologize; it was necessary to explain; perhaps it was also necessary—at all events, he could not, when once he had begun speaking, resist the impulse—to avow his own utterly hopeless and long-concealed love. He described it as utterly hopeless; but it may be that some vestige of hope had nevertheless

found foothold in a cranny of his mind ; for her reply had the effect upon him of a deluge of ice-cold water.

“I am sorry,” she said—“I really am sorry, and I hate to seem ungrateful. But of course the kindest thing is to tell the truth, and the truth is that I could never, by any possibility, marry you. Just think of the incongruity of it ! I am an Irish landlord’s daughter, you are a Radical Home Ruler ; my tastes are Bohemian, or beginning to be ; yours are strictly humdrum—”

“I look upon all that as the merest detail,” Wilfrid interrupted.

“Well, I am afraid I don’t, and can’t. But setting all that aside, there remains the fatal fact—”

“That you don’t love me.”

She nodded.

“At one time it might have been imaginable. I will be quite honest with you and confess that when I first saw you at Rathfinnan it did seem to me to be imaginable. Even after that—but not now ! And, Mr. Elles, there is another thing that I should like to say to you, if you won’t be hurt.”

“A little additional pain won’t matter,” answered Wilfrid, ruefully.

“Well, then, you aren’t as much in love as you think. That is, not with me—not with Miss Power, of the St. Martin’s Theatre. You are still a little in love with a certain girl of the name of Nora, who has ceased to exist ; fortunately for you, you aren’t called upon to make that painful discovery for yourself, after marriage. Oh, I don’t say that I am any worse than the defunct Nora ; in some ways I think I am rather better. Only I am not in the

least what she was, and I am not in the least what you will want your wife to be. You will acknowledge that, I am sure, after the Home Rule Bill, for which you are going to vote—”

“I don’t know that I am going to vote for it.”

“Well, after it has been rejected—with or without your help. Then, I hope, we shall all be good friends again, and I shall not live in constant terror of a quarrel between you and my father.”

He interpreted her glance in the direction of the door as meaning that Mr. Power might at any moment be expected to appear, and he agreed with her that, until the Home Rule Bill was passed or defeated, there could be little prospect of a renewal of friendly relations between him and her father. He therefore took the hint and retired—not ungracefully.

“You haven’t surprised me,” were his last words; “I told you that I had no hope. But I had fears—which you have partially removed. So I am to that extent better off than I was an hour ago.”

For all that, he carried a heavy heart away with him. His fears, as he had said, were but partially allayed; she had not quite convinced him of the innocent character of Southfield’s assiduous attentions, nor did he believe very much in the transformation which she professed to have undergone. However that might be, he was certain that he himself had not changed, and that there was no shadow of ground for her assertion that he was enamoured of a non-existent person.

“And she as good as confessed that she was very near loving me before she came to London,” he

sighed. "Why, if I was imaginable as a husband then, should I be unimaginable now? Of course there's only one answer. She may say what she likes, but it's evident to me that she does care for that fellow; and I very much doubt whether she understands that he is clean out of her reach."

He looked at his watch. It was not too late to call in Tilney Street, whither he knew that Lady Virginia had now returned from abroad, and he thought that he would like—if she should be at home and in an amiable humor—to talk things over with her. In other words, he wanted very badly to be comforted, and felt irresistibly impelled to seek comfort in a quarter where experience had taught him that quick comprehension and sympathy were to be looked for. Nora Power might have pronounced that inclination of his significant; and so, very likely, it was. Although, in truth, it did not signify much more than that he was a lonely man, with only one woman friend, besides Nora herself, in the world. Her ladyship was still out driving, the Tilney Street butler informed him, but would probably be back very soon. Mr. Lethbridge and Lady Laura were at home. So, after hesitating for a moment, Wilfrid stepped across the threshold, and was presently shaking hands with two acquaintances who were kind enough to say that they were very glad to see him again.

"Virginia," Mr. Lethbridge announced, "has a crow to pluck with you. I need not tell you that the local newspapers are always forwarded to her, and she considers that your speeches lacked fire and enthusiasm. For my own part, I thought them

highly creditable. Sit down and fortify yourself with a cup of tea against the wiggling that awaits you."

Lady Laura poured out his tea for him. She was more loquacious than usual, and had plenty to say about Paris, where it appeared that she had been enjoying herself.

"And what have you been doing all this time?" she inquired.

"Nothing in the least pleasant or interesting," answered Wilfrid. "I have been busy, of course, This is really the first free day that I have had since the House rose."

"And what have you been doing to-day?"

Before he could reply, a card was brought to Mr. Lethbridge, who glanced at it and muttered:

"Oh, bother! Well, I suppose I must see the man. Don't get up, Elles; Virginia will be here in a minute or two, I expect, and you may as well face her rebukes, now that you are on the spot."

CHAPTER XXVIII

TWO CONFIDENTIAL STATEMENTS

As soon as her brother-in-law was out of the room, Lady Laura repeated her question :

“ Well, what have you been doing to-day ?”

“ I wonder whether it would interest you to hear,” answered Wilfrid, yielding to one of those absurd temptations from which even the stupidest women are exempt, but which frequently assail our simple, purblind sex. “ I have been asking for an irrevocable sentence—and getting it ; that’s all.”

“ Asking whom ?”

“ Oh, Miss Power. I didn’t start with any intention of the kind, but I met her in the street, and she invited me into her house, and so—the whole thing came out before I could stop myself. Not that postponement would have made any difference ; she told me in the most unequivocal terms that nothing ever would or could induce her to marry me. I came here, all forlorn, to tell your sister about it.”

Lady Laura, who was eating a piece of tea-cake, appeared to have swallowed a crumb the wrong way. It was some moments before she subdued her excess of coughing, and was able to ejaculate :

“ How extraordinary of you !”

“ To propose to Miss Power ?”

“No; I dare say there was nothing extraordinary in that—though I confess it hadn’t occurred to me that you were smitten there—but to think of applying to Virginia, of all people, to bind up your wounds!”

“Why not?” asked Wilfrid, slightly nettled. “She has always been a kind and sympathizing friend to me, and I believe she had an inkling of the truth, if you hadn’t.”

“Not she!—you may take my word for that. I thought—but it doesn’t much matter what I thought. What I think is that, if you are wise, you will say nothing to her about this little disappointment of yours. Virginia doesn’t like her—well, shall we say her friends?—to incur such disappointments. She doesn’t mind inflicting them, if necessary; but she would find it difficult to pardon another woman for poaching upon her preserves, or you for allowing another woman to be a poacher.”

“I wish,” said Wilfrid, rather plaintively, “you wouldn’t talk like that. You have taken up a totally erroneous notion.”

But Lady Laura persisted in talking like that, and declined to admit that she had fallen into any error beyond the trifling one of imagining that Mr. Elles’s interest in Miss Power was of a purely unselfish character. And even with regard to the strength and permanence of that attachment of his she was pleased to express a certain degree of scepticism, which had to be overcome by vehement protestations and a full recital of her confidant’s history during the past year. Nor, in spite of the encouragement which she gave him to amplify details, did she appear, when he had made an end of speaking, to be as full of commiseration

tion for his hard lot as a really kind friend should have been.

“It won’t take you a very long time to recover,” was her rather unfeeling remark. “I think I remember telling you once before that your common-sense would never allow you to fall over head and ears in love with anybody. I suppose, after what you have said, there can be no doubt that you are as much in love with Miss Power as you know how to be; but that doesn’t mean that there is cause for serious alarm.”

For the rest, she remained convinced that cause for serious alarm was equally non-existent in her brother’s case.

“Virginia has her eye on him, and he knows it. He will behave himself. Of course I can’t answer for the girl, who may have been foolish enough or unlucky enough to lose her heart to him; but, then, I don’t see how you or Virginia or Southfield or anybody else could have prevented that sort of catastrophe. One doesn’t lose one’s heart for the pleasure of losing it.”

As Lady Virginia did not appear, and as the foregoing conversation had somewhat discouraged him, Wilfrid took his leave at the end of half an hour. In the hall he was intercepted by Mr. Lethbridge, who stepped out hastily to beg for a word of information and counsel.

“I wish you wouldn’t mind telling me in confidence, Elles, whether there is really anything—anything that signifies, I mean—between Southfield and your fascinating young friend from Kerry. That old ass Bland has been here, asking a lot of ques-

tions and wanting to know the truth about current reports.”

“Has he any right to ask questions?” Wilfrid inquired.

“He has none whatever to come bothering me,” replied Mr. Lethbridge, with an evident sense of ill-usage upon him, “but I suppose Virginia would say that he had rights of a kind. As you probably know, she proposes to welcome his fair daughter into the family, and there seems to be some difficulty about bringing Southfield up to the scratch. All these manœuvres are quite outside my province. Still I’m bound to admit that I shall think Southfield rather an idiot if he chooses this particular moment to create some fresh scandal.”

“I can only repeat what I have said more than once already,” Wilfrid declared. “Miss Power is a lady by birth—”

“Oh, that’s no security!” interpolated the other.

“And, to the best of my knowledge and belief, she is absolutely incapable of disgracing herself in the way at which you hint. But I don’t mind telling you that I saw her this afternoon, and took the liberty of pointing out that her intimacy with Lord Southfield laid her open to misrepresentation and calumny. Her answers convinced me that at all events he hasn’t been guilty of—of anything like disrespect towards her as yet.”

“H’m! Well, let us hope it’s all right, then. I referred old Bland to Virginia; but he said he didn’t like speaking to ladies on such delicate subjects. The truth, I suppose, was that he thought he could pump me, and knew he couldn’t pump her.”

Whatever may have been Sir Samuel Bland's calculations, Wilfrid was destined for some time to come to hear no more about them or him, and very little more about the other personages concerned in the small social drama which occupied his thoughts at all leisure moments. Of leisure moments he had, to be sure, but few in those days; for the second reading of the Government of Ireland Bill was now in full swing, and Liberals who were wavering, or supposed to be wavering, were the objects of such constant and careful nursing that they could scarcely call their souls their own. Still he was not so busy but that he could have found time to run round to Tilney Street, had he been begged to do so, and the somewhat emphatic lack of any such solicitations on Lady Virginia's part hurt him a little. He had frequent notes (dealing chiefly with political topics) from her, in which she deplored the multiplicity of engagements which at that season of the year always prevented her from seeing the people whom she wanted to see; but it was quite evident to him that, for some reason or other, he himself was not just then one of those people. Did she fear that some of the arguments employed by Opposition speakers in the House of Commons might be found unanswerable in private conversation? Was she reluctant to discuss her brother's relations with Miss Power? Had she guessed, or been informed of, Wilfrid's own defeated aspirations, and could she really be annoyed with him for having entertained them? These and other questions of even greater moment had to go unanswered; for he did not care to seem importunate, nor could he very well take

any steps towards ascertaining whether Nora had profited by his warning or not.

Rather more than a fortnight had elapsed when Wilfrid, lingering over his solitary breakfast one morning in the big dining-room, which always seemed to him to be peopled with the slightly disdainful shades of his late uncle's grave intimates, was made aware through the medium of a visiting-card that the Earl of Southfield requested the favor of an interview. He at once rose and betook himself to the library, where he found the owner of the card reading the morning paper and smoking a cigarette.

"How are you, Elles?" said Lord Southfield, without getting up. "Don't mind my smoking, do you?"

"Of course, not," answered Wilfrid, "I am going to smoke myself."

"I ought to apologize," his lordship went on, "for looking you up at this time of day; but one must catch you parliamentary beggars when one can. You seem to have had rather a big meeting at the Foreign Office yesterday. I suppose you were there to receive your orders?"

Wilfrid had been present at the historical gathering alluded to, having been summoned thither, in common with other members of this party, to listen to a pronouncement from the lips of the Prime Minister, but he could not say that he had received any precise orders.

"To tell you the truth," he frankly owned, "I am rather more in the dark than I was. We were told nothing at all about the Land Purchase Bill, and the other bill, it seems, is to be dropped if it

passes the second reading. A plain man doesn't see the meaning of such a policy as that."

Lord Southfield was of opinion that it presented no serious difficulties to the average intelligence.

"Your leader is like one of those faddists who come round pestering one to sign some senseless petition or other. Signing can't do any harm, one is always told, because the whole blessed thing is only going to be shoved into a pigeon-hole; all that is wanted is to insert the thin end of the wedge. Well, it's just the same argument. 'Keep us in office by voting for the second reading, and we'll undertake that the measure, as it stands, shall never become law.' Immoral, if you like, but scarcely incomprehensible."

This view, which happened to coincide with Wilfrid's own, caused him to shake his head. But he could not suppose that his visitor had called for the purpose of elucidating Mr. Gladstone's instructions to doubting disciples, and indeed it soon became clear that Lord Southfield had come to Rutland Gate upon some other errand. Despite his habitual nonchalance, which was fairly well maintained, he was not quite at his ease; nor did Wilfrid feel called upon to make him any more so. At length—perceiving, perhaps, that he would get no help without asking for it—he plunged rather abruptly *in medias res*.

"Look here, Elles; I want to ask your advice. I know you are in Virginia's confidence, and it can't be any secret to you that she has determined to marry me to Sir Samuel Bland's daughter. Well, I can't do the thing—I really can't."

“Then don’t do it,” was the obvious advice which this announcement appeared to demand.

“All very fine ; but one must give reasons, don’t you see ? The worst of it is that I did, in a sort of way, agree. That was in the summer ; that was before—in short, before I discovered that it was impossible.”

“I don’t wish to insult an absent lady,” said Wilfrid, “but really I should have thought that Miss Bland’s face might have furnished you with a sufficient reason.”

“Bless your life, no ! She was as ugly as sin a year ago, and she hasn’t grown any uglier that I know of ; whereas her father, I believe, has grown a good bit richer. Oh, it isn’t her face that’s the difficulty ; it’s—well, in fact, it’s somebody else’s face.”

No doubt it was, and nothing was easier than to divine above whose shoulders the face in question was nightly visible to an admiring public ; but surely the ironical Fates had exceeded all the permissible limits of a joke in despatching Lord Southfield to make such an avowal to his present hearer !

“I presume,” said Wilfrid, rather grimly, “that that is a graceful allusion to Miss Power.”

“I don’t know about it’s being graceful,” Lord Southfield replied, “but you may score a bull’s-eye for your shot. It is on account of Miss Power that I shall have to refuse the Bland moneybags and get myself into the devil’s own row with Virginia.”

“You are indeed to be pitied !” said Wilfrid. “But perhaps things are not quite so bad as you think. Perhaps, after all, you will screw yourself

up to marrying the heiress, and will overcome your unfortunate passion for the actress. You have already managed to subdue a considerable number of such passions, haven't you?"

"Never was in love with any woman on earth until now!" Lord Southfield audaciously declared.

"Really? Well, I am afraid you have come to the wrong place for assistance. You forget, I suppose, that Miss Power is a personal friend of mine, and that the very last thing I am likely to do is to intercede with her on behalf of a man who has no intention of marrying her."

"But that's exactly where you're wrong, my dear fellow. I have every intention of marrying her—if she'll take me."

Confronted by an announcement so startling and so unexpected, Wilfrid could only stare silently and stupidly. It appeared, moreover, that his intercession with Nora was neither requested nor required: what Lord Southfield wanted was to be advised how to deal with his sister, of whom he seemed to be ludicrously afraid. He was, he confessed, at his wit's end; he had been putting her off with one excuse after another, but now she held him at bay. Sir Samuel had been indirectly inquiring his intentions, and it behooved him to say something—anything that a clever chap like Elles might suggest.

"Is there any particular reason," Wilfrid asked, "why you shouldn't tell the truth?"

"My good man, I simply daren't! The truth, of course, will have to be told; but that won't be until Miss Power has accepted me—which she hasn't done

yet, and perhaps never will do. Meanwhile Virginia must be kept quiet somehow, and I believe that if anybody can keep her quiet you can."

Wilfrid hastened to disclaim the flattering imputation. He did not for one moment believe that he was clever enough to deceive Lady Virginia. "Added to which, if you'll excuse my saying so, why should I try? What business is it of mine?"

"You are a friend of Miss Power's," said Lord Southfield.

"I don't know, I'm sure; Home Rulers are no friends of hers, she says. But even assuming that I am—"

"Then, from a common-sense, unromantic point of view, you ought to wish her to marry me. I don't pretend to be what you could call a brilliant catch; still there's the title, and, between ourselves, I'm not so hard up as some people think I am. You may say that my record is a bit queer; but that's all over and done with. What I told you just now is quite true. I have never really cared a straw for any woman before, and if Nora will have me, I'll undertake that she shall not repent of her bargain."

Wilfrid sighed.

"Well?" he said, after a pause.

"Well, my honest belief is that any true friend of hers would say that she was unlikely to do better. So, if you're a true friend of hers, you will lend me a helping hand with Virginia."

"Do you seriously mean," asked Wilfrid, "that your sister can force you, against your will, to propose to Miss Bland and leave the girl whom you profess to love in the lurch?"

“Not quite that; but I mean that Virginia is the most resolute human being of my acquaintance, and that, supposing the truth were to dawn upon her, she would stick at nothing to get Miss Power to refuse me. All I want is a little more time, and all I ask of you is to help me to keep her in the dark a little longer. She’s sure to question you about me. I could see yesterday that she was beginning to smell a rat.”

Some further conversation resulted in a promise on Wilfrid’s part that he would do what in him lay. It seemed, after all, to be his duty to give Nora, if he could, the chance of becoming Lady Southfield, and he did not care to play the part of dog in the manger. Nevertheless, after his visitor had left him, he muttered: “Well, this is true friendship with a vengeance!”

CHAPTER XXIX

THE REWARD OF INDEPENDENCE

LISTENING, day after day and night after night, to the progress of the debate upon the second reading of the Irish Government Bill, Wilfrid was struck by the unreality of the contest in which he was engaged. It was unreal, he thought, inasmuch as its ostensible subject seemed almost to have dropped out of sight. Other, and possibly weightier, issues were no doubt involved ; it was becoming, and indeed had already become, a question whether the great Liberal party of the Victorian era was to survive the battle or breathe its last upon the battle-field. But these party questions had never possessed much interest for him, nor did he see how he could be expected to vote against his conscience and convictions for the sake of helping to bring about a mere party victory. And he really did not think that his conscience or his convictions would allow him to support a measure which appeared to him to be in many respects unsound, and with which its own author was not eager to persevere.

The leader of the Opposition, this uncertain Ministerialist considered, hit the nail upon the head when he accused Mr. Gladstone of trifling with Parliament, and reminded the Premier of his own previous warnings against the danger of putting forward schemes

which "might mean anything or nothing," which might "conciliate the feelings of the people of Ireland for a moment and attract a passing breath of popularity, but which, when the day of trial came, would be found utterly to fail." Surely, too, he was in the right when he demanded "something like a real definition of the Prime Minister's policy." Not without long fencing was that definition extorted from the occupants of the Treasury bench; but when at last the information was elicited that the Queen was to be advised to prorogue Parliament, it became evident that the House had nothing but an abstract resolution before it. The bill was dead, and there was, therefore, little to be gained by attacking or defending its provisions.

Well, it is possible, of course, for an honest man to vote in favor of an abstract principle, and Wilfrid Elles, for one, would have been prepared to vote for the principle that Ireland was entitled to self-government in some shape or form; but when it transpired that those who upheld the present scheme would be looked upon as pledged to do so again, on its reintroduction in practically identical terms, he mentally laid back his ears. Like many other members who were known or suspected to be hesitating, he was pestered by the threats and cajoleries of wire-pullers, and these were not of a nature to produce the desired effect upon him.

"The long and the short of it," he was provoked into remarking to one of his counsellors, "is that you want what you call our side to win, and you will stigmatize me as a traitor if I don't play up to the best of my humble ability for our side. But that sort of

thing doesn't appeal to me in the least. I don't care a rap about sides, and if I think a bill bad or unworkable as it stands, I must give my vote against it."

On being reminded that he had been sent up to Parliament as an adherent of the cause which he now seemed to claim the privilege of opposing, Wilfrid declared, truly enough, that he had given his constituents no unconditional pledge whatsoever.

"If they are dissatisfied with me, they shall have the earliest possible opportunity of expressing their dissatisfaction. I can't say yet whether I shall vote for the second reading or not, because I don't know; all I do know is that I am not going to be bullied by anybody."

But it was, in truth, very nearly certain by this time that he would join the ranks of the malcontent Liberals. Whatever his constituents might be or become, he himself was profoundly dissatisfied. The difficulties and intricacies of the Irish question had of late grown much more apparent to him than in the days when he had been disposed to deem it only fair that a race which appealed, through an overwhelming majority of its representatives, for the restoration of its separate Legislature should be granted what it asked; he doubted whether those difficulties and intricacies could be overcome, and he doubted still more whether any genuine effort was being made to overcome them. He was, in a word, sick of the whole insincere, complicated business, and longed to be out of it. How much better, healthier, and happier to be shooting tigers in India, or even red deer in Scotland!

This slightly petulant frame of mind was doubt-

less due in some measure to dissatisfaction with private as well as public affairs. Contrary to what he had been led to expect, Lady Virginia had not as yet applied to him for a report upon her brother's proceedings; he had been unable to display the magnanimous self-abnegation to which he was more or less committed, and the delay fretted him. He was, perhaps, rather more willing to be magnanimous than to be ignored, and he wondered a little why her ladyship persisted in ignoring him. It might have been expected that, at such a juncture, she would see the advisability of keeping a friendly eye upon him, and encouraging him, by friendly admonitions, to nail his Gladstonian colors to the mast.

Either because she believed such admonitions to be superfluous or because she had other reasons for wishing to hold the young legislator temporarily at arm's-length, Lady Virginia made no sign, and Wilfrid was left to grapple unaided with a problem which was causing many heart-searchings among those who sat near him. The debate—protracted, no doubt, on strategic grounds—dragged on after it had lost all interest for one of its impatient auditors; yet on its twelfth and concluding night, by which time he was resolved to vote against it, two speeches went near to throwing him back into indecision. The representations—cold, measured, and moderate, as usual—of Mr. Parnell did not fail to produce some effect upon him. He thought, as the Irish leader did, that coercion was the only alternative to the species of agreement now offered; he could not but acknowledge that coercion in the past had been a total failure; he could not but foresee that if

coercion was to have a chance in the future, it must assume the methods of downright despotism. And to resist the second reading of this bill, however numerous might be its inherent defects, was perhaps equivalent to advocating those methods. Then, after one or two other speakers on both sides of the House had reiterated previous arguments, Mr. Gladstone rose to wind up the debate with a rhetorical appeal so fine and so persuasive that there was great difficulty in listening to it unmoved. Distress, disaffection, smouldering insurrection were, he urged, chronic in Ireland because "you have not got that respect for the law, and that sympathy with the law on the part of the people, without which real civilization cannot exist"; and that coercive legislation could ever produce that respect and sympathy was scarcely contended.

"We do not," he continued, "undervalue or despise the forces opposed to us. . . . I do not deny that many are against us whom we should have expected to be for us; I do not deny that some whom we see against us have caused us, by their conscientious action, the bitterest disappointment. But you have power, you have wealth, you have rank, you have station, you have organization, you have the place of power. What have we? We think that we have the people's heart; we believe and we know we have the promise of the harvest of the future. . . . As to the harvest of the future, I doubt if you have so much confidence, and I believe that there is in the breast of many a man who means to vote against us to-night a profound misgiving, approaching even to a deep conviction, that the end will be

as we foresee and not as you—that the ebbing tide is with you and the flowing tide is with us.”

Soon afterwards came the peroration, assisted so powerfully by the voice and personality of the speaker, in which members were exhorted to “think well, think wisely, think not for a moment but for the years that are to come, before you reject this bill.”

Wilfrid sighed, shook his shoulders, called to memory certain inexorable, indisputable facts which no eloquence could change, and—walked with ninety-two other Liberals into the No lobby. It could not be helped, it was impossible for him to act otherwise; but it gave him no satisfaction to desert what, when all was said, retained the appearance of a generous effort, nor could he join in the frantic cheering which greeted the announcement of the numbers and the defeat of the Ministry by a majority of thirty. Whether, by voting as he had done, he had proclaimed himself a permanent opponent of Home Rule or not he hardly knew; but he had, at all events, helped to turn out a Home Rule Government, and nothing, he supposed, was more likely than that he himself would promptly be turned out by the Heckingley electors for his pains. He had certainly been given to understand through local channels that such would be the consequence of a declaration of independence on his part.

“So much the better!” was the first thing that he said to himself on waking the next morning. “A man is what he is, and he only wastes time and energy when he tries to be something else. I can’t make myself into a statesman, nor even into a poli-

tician, because my poor old uncle wanted me to be one. I take it that this is about the end of my brilliant political career. It only remains now to sell this infernal incubus of a house, pension off the servants, and fly the country."

Of course that programme could not be literally carried out upon the spur of the moment; numerous things had to be done before he would be able to claim unfettered liberty once more. Parliament was not yet dissolved, and most likely would not be dissolved for several months to come; he owed something to his constituents; possibly even something to Lady Virginia Lethbridge, not to mention Nora Power and her converted rake. But, for all that, land was in sight. Not, to be sure, precisely a promised land, flowing with milk and honey, yet one in which a well-intentioned, bewildered mortal might hope to call his soul his own again. So after breakfast Wilfrid mounted his horse and rode off to the Park in somewhat better spirits than his situation ostensibly warranted.

Now, it came to pass that while he was pacing gently along Rotten Row, enjoying the soft air of a fair but cloudy summer day, he was arrested by two pedestrians, who first raised their hands to stop him and then held out their hands to be grasped.

"Come, Elles, didn't I tell you so?" was Mr. Fitzpatrick's greeting.

It was natural that Mr. Fitzpatrick should be exultant, and kind of him to make the complimentary remarks which he hastened to make; but Wilfrid had scarcely been prepared for the cordiality of Mr. Power, who looked very smart, with his gray frock-

coat and his eighteen-penny button-hole, and who apologized in the fullest and handsomest manner for by-gone incivilities.

“My dear fellow, I ought to have known better than to misjudge you as I did. All I can say is that I beg your pardon and respect your honesty. Small blame to you if you believed in Home Rule for a time! What do you know about Ireland! You’ve proved to us now, though, that you’re neither a knave nor a dupe.”

It seemed best to accept that flattering assurance with a smile and a slight shrug of the shoulders. When a friend with whom you have never wished to quarrel, but who has tried his best to quarrel with you, holds out the olive-branch of peace, discussion and argument may as well be dispensed with. Presently Mr. Fitzpatrick, who had been accosted by an acquaintance, moved away, and then Mr. Power, leaning over the railings, resumed, confidentially :

“I’d be glad to have a talk with you, my dear boy, one of these days, if you could spare me half an hour or so.”

“About politics?” inquired Wilfrid.

“God forbid! No; it’s about my daughter Nora that I would like to consult you. For I know you wish her well, and I can tell you that she thinks more of what you say and advise than she does of anything that may fall from her down-trodden old father.”

“I am afraid you are mistaken there,” said Wilfrid.

“No, I’m not mistaken; I know what I’m saying. And, between ourselves, I’m anxious about the girl—devilish anxious.”

He was so anxious, it appeared, that he could not defer explanations to a more private scene and season. Wilfrid was told how he had loathed "this accursed play-acting business" from the first, and had only been driven by sheer lack of ready money to give his sanction to it; how he longed to see Nora well and safely married to a man of her own station in life, and how he had not failed to notice the attentions of Lord Southfield.

"As good a fellow, in my opinion, as ever stepped; but—"

"But with a reputation which might be better, from a strictly moral point of view," Wilfrid ventured to suggest.

"Oh, hang the reputation and the moral point of view! He has sown his wild oats, I dare say, like the rest of us; I think none the worse of him for that. You may be sure I shouldn't have allowed him to haunt my house as he has done of late if I hadn't satisfied myself that his intentions were all they ought to be. In fact, I don't mind telling you that he has intimated as much to me. Not in so many words; still, as plainly as was necessary."

"Then, if you don't want me to give Lord Southfield a character, in what way can I be of use to you?" Wilfrid inquired.

Mr. Power laid his hand upon the neck of Wilfrid's horse, who promptly responded by making a grab at his button-hole.

"In this way," he answered; "you can speak a word for him to Nora. He hasn't asked her yet; but he will ask her, and it's on my mind that she may be foolish enough to refuse him. She has no-

tions about the dignity of independence and self-support—Heaven knows what rubbish and nonsense! I'm afraid she may think he is condescending to her and send him to the right-about. I believe that if anybody can prevail upon her not to throw away her chances of happiness like that, you can."

Wilfrid could not repress a short laugh. So he—of all people!—was expected, not only to do what in him lay towards persuading the girl whom he loved into marrying a man quite unworthy of her, but to throw dust in the eyes of that man's opposing relations! He said to himself that it really was rather a large order. But to Mr. Power he only said:

"Surely, all depends upon whether your daughter cares for Southfield or not. If she does, she'll forgive him for seeming to condescend; if she doesn't—well, in that case, I presume you wouldn't wish her to accept him."

Mr. Power was convinced that she did—convinced also that the admonitions of a valued friend would suffice to overcome her misplaced scruples. So the valued friend ended by promising to take advantage of any opportunity that might be accorded to him.

"Why not?" he muttered under his breath, as he resumed his ride. "If she is not fair for me, what care I for whose sake she may be pleased to exhibit her essentially feminine quality of unfairness? For I do call it rather unfair to set me down as 'unimaginable' on account of my political opinions."

The honest truth, perhaps, was that he did not care quite as much as he would have done some months back. There was something in Nora's assertion that he was in love with what she had been, not with

what she was, and although he felt bound to be very sorry for himself, he was fain to acknowledge that he was not inconsolable. Only he did hope that the next thing would not be a demand from Lady Virginia upon his good offices, to protect her brother against forming a misalliance!

CHAPTER XXX

LADY LAURA IS QUITE SATISFIED

“DISGUSTED with you? Well—naturally!” exclaimed Lady Virginia. “This comes of letting people out of one’s sight for a short time and trusting them to behave with ordinary decency! I suppose you fully realize that you are done for now. Heckingley, you may depend upon it, won’t look at you again, and whether you will be able to find another constituency, in which political tergiversation is popular, remains to be seen. Anyhow, I can’t provide you with one.”

Wilfrid replied that he fully realized all that. Moreover, he rather liked it. As for the Heckingley electors, he had not the slightest intention of begging their pardon. “You are the only person who perhaps has some little excuse for being disappointed in me, and even your excuse is none of the best. You must have known all along that I was a broken reed.”

“You are broken now, at all events,” retorted her ladyship, with a snort.

But although she had been scolding him for the best part of half an hour, he perceived that she was not in reality so very angry. The defeat of the Government did not, she declared, cause her any mis-

givings whatsoever; it had been a foregone conclusion—a mere prelude to the coming triumph.

“What I do regret is that you should have cut your own throat like this. I look upon myself as your political godmother, and I dare say I might have preserved you from straying so scandalously if I hadn’t been too busy with other things. Unfortunately, one can’t be everywhere. One’s consolation must be that the other things have arranged themselves satisfactorily, and that the Bland engagement is an accomplished fact.”

“What!” ejaculated Wilfrid, aghast.

He was in Tilney Street for the double purpose of endeavoring to make his peace with his self-styled political godmother and redeem his pledge to Lord Southfield, so that this unforeseen announcement threw him completely upon his beam ends.

“Oh yes,” responded Lady Virginia, tranquilly, “Didn’t you see it in the papers this morning?”

Wilfrid drew a long breath. “No, I didn’t see it in the papers,” he answered. “I must own that your influence over your brother is—most remarkable!”

“Oh, it isn’t my brother—who, by the way, seems bent upon giving me trouble—it’s Laura and Sir Samuel.”

“You can’t mean it!”

“Of course I mean it, and of course it is the very best thing that could have happened. May one make so bold as to ask whether you know of any just impediment?”

She was looking him smilingly in the face, and he was conscious of something not entirely friendly in

her gaze. Yet, at the risk offending her, he exclaimed :

“ Well, I call it downright revolting !”

A delicate color mounted into Lady Virginia's cheeks, but she continued to smile.

“ How belated of you to use such language at this time of day !” she remarked. “ If you had said that last summer—why didn't you say it last summer ?”

“ I don't know what you mean.”

“ You really can't be quite as dense as you pretend to be. However, it was nothing more than a passing fancy, and she has got over it now ; so there's no harm done.”

“ Who has got over what ?”

“ Magnall's questions aren't in it with you ! I beg to decline further examination. But, seriously, it isn't revolting, and I hope you won't say anything of that kind again. Of course, it isn't every girl who could safely marry her grandfather ; but Laura is exactly cut out for the part. I honestly believe that most young men bore her a good deal more than poor old prosy Sir Samuel does. She will be as happy with him as she has it in her to be with anybody. And she will be very rich.”

There were so many remarks upon the tip of Wilfrid's tongue that he wisely refrained from letting any of them go farther. He listened while Lady Virginia, after expatiating complacently upon the vast proportions of Sir Samuel Bland's wealth, went on to confess that she was a little less easy about her brother than she was about her sister.

“ One didn't exactly want to bring off the double event simultaneously ; to have father and daughter

espousing brother and sister on one and the same day would be a dangerous approach to farce. But it would have been more in accordance with the fitness of things for Southfield to speak first—and he hasn't spoken yet!"

"Envious reticence," remarked Wilfrid, dryly.

"It's nothing of the sort! I shall not envy his feelings if we hear, some fine morning, that that patient spinster has grown tired of waiting for him to make up his mind and has accepted somebody else. I need not tell you that there is no lack of somebody elses."

"Perhaps," suggested Wilfrid, "his regret won't be as poignant as yours."

Lady Virginia glanced up sharply.

"Oh, well," said she, "I see what will have to be done. I must speak plainly to Miss Power. I will say for the girl that she isn't devoid of pride, and if Southfield were insane enough—but I know him better than to believe that he will ever be so insane as to do what you are thinking about."

As a matter of fact, Wilfrid was thinking about something else at the moment; but now he pulled himself together and called to mind the promises which he had given.

"No doubt," said he, "you know your brother very well; but perhaps I know Miss Power rather better than you do, and I shouldn't advise you to rouse her pride after that fashion. You must remember that she doesn't consider herself either your inferior or Lord Southfield's, and she might be tempted to give an answer quite contrary to what one of you expects. You will admit, I dare say,

that any woman can get any man to offer marriage to her if she gives her whole mind to it."

Lady Virginia laughed, and then frowned meditatively.

"You would let well—or ill—alone, then?" she asked.

"For the present, I should," was the Machiavelian Wilfrid's reply. "It seems to me that your brother has got his head up, and that jobbing at his mouth will do no sort of good. As for Miss Power—well, does it strike you as good policy to let her see how easily she could turn the tables upon you, in acknowledgment of what she will naturally look upon as your impertinence?"

He felt a little ashamed of himself afterwards for having drawn so unflattering a portrait of Nora; but at the same time he did not see how he could have served Lord Southfield and Mr. Power better than by speaking as he had done. Nora herself, it might be anticipated, would neither require nor request counsel of him. She would doubtless do just precisely what she wanted to do—had not that been her unvarying custom?

For the rest, he could not help being more pre-occupied with the destinies of Lady Laura Mayne than with those of Nora Power. It was impossible to misunderstand the meaning of that casual statement of Lady Virginia's which he had declared that he did not understand. That it had been only a passing fancy he was quite ready to believe; still it had existed, and now—she was going to marry that odious old snob! One can't contemplate such things—nobody can—without a certain degree of mental

perturbation, and for some days after this the member for the Heckingley division found his attention continually wandering from the business before the House. That business was not, to be sure, of absorbing interest. Parliament was to be dissolved before the end of the month, all contentious measures had been abandoned, the proceedings were practically formal, and if Mr. Elles had seen fit to absent himself, no remonstrances would have been addressed to him. He continued, however, to form one of a much-reduced assemblage—partly because he had nothing else to do, partly by reason of that half-regretful feeling which prompts us to hang about even uncongenial scenes which we must soon quit. Wilfrid was well aware that a considerable length of time was likely to elapse before he again saw the inside of the House of Commons.

Lady Virginia was not so offended by what she was pleased to call his political tergiversation but that she sent him frequent little notes, requesting his presence at this or that entertainment (it dawned upon him now why these had lately been withheld), and, in response to one of them, he found himself seated at her dinner-table on a sultry evening between Miss Bland and Lady Laura. To the former he had not much to say, while the latter, apparently, had nothing to say to him. Her shoulder, from first to last, was so markedly turned towards her neighbor that he was fain to content himself with silent observation, and to draw such conclusions as might suggest themselves to him from the serene complacency of her aspect. Her preposterous fiancé surveyed her, across the space of glass and silver and flowers which separated them,

with the satisfied air of one who has paid a high price for a really valuable acquisition and doesn't care who knows it. Every now and then he threw her an encouraging smile and nod to which she did not seem to object. Wilfrid, irritated, shocked, and perhaps a trifle piqued into the bargain, said to himself that women were indeed unaccountable beings.

Nevertheless, he did not wish to leave the house without having accounted, upon some more or less plausible theory, for the conduct of this one, and at a later hour he was enabled to approach her in the drawing-room, where she had taken up her position beside one of the open windows.

"I haven't had an opportunity of congratulating you yet, Lady Laura," he began.

She laughed.

"Oh, but you needn't do such violence to your feelings and prejudices," she replied, good-humoredly. "I told you once, as you may recollect, that I should very likely startle and horrify my friends some day. I don't forbid you to be startled and horrified, and I don't expect to be congratulated. There is no occasion for you to look so compassionate, though; I am quite satisfied. My future step-daughter is really the only cloud upon an otherwise bright horizon."

"And you will soon dispose of that cloud, no doubt."

"*Si Dieu veut.* But my brother doesn't show signs of hastening to the rescue. Perhaps you might be disposed to come forward as a candidate—now that other projects have unfortunately fallen through?"

"That does not strike me as being either a very amusing or a very kind speech," said Wilfrid.

"Doesn't it?" returned the girl, absently. "I'll

withdraw it, then. Let us talk about something else. What a stifling hot night !”

But Wilfrid did not choose to be put off like that.

“Why are you doing this?” he asked, abruptly. “I don’t believe you are satisfied; I don’t believe that you are happy, or that you ever can be with that old man, whom I know you despise !”

Lady Laura’s large, sleepy eyes flashed. For once and for a moment she looked thoroughly angry. But it was without any verbal display of temper that she rejoined :

“Is that your notion of a kind and amusing speech ? Perhaps, after all, we had better fall back upon the congratulations which I declined just now. They weren’t going to be sincere, it seems ; but at all events they will be a little more appropriate than rebukes.”

Wilfrid begged her pardon, admitting that he had been impertinent.

“And yet I can’t imitate you by withdrawing my words. When all is said, we have been friends, you and I, and surely one isn’t expected to look on quietly while a friend makes preparations for committing suicide !”

“One is expected to give one’s friends credit for knowing their own minds, and even if they don’t—”

Wilfrid opened his lips to interrupt her, but was himself interrupted by Lady Virginia, who flitted across the room at this moment and tapped him on the shoulder with her fan. Possibly Lady Virginia thought that the above colloquy had lasted long enough. She said : “Come and be reasoned with by Sir Samuel, who thinks that you and other seceding

Radicals may yet be lectured out of your unreasonableness."

Lady Laura tranquilly concluded her sentence. "And even if they don't they sometimes know quite well what other people's minds are—which answers the same purpose and saves a lot of trouble."

That it might save trouble Wilfrid could understand, while lending a wandering attention to the eloquence of Sir Samuel Bland, whose mind was quite made up to adopting the entire Gladstonian programme, whatever that might ultimately prove to be: how it could be said to answer the same purpose he was unable to see. But he was given no chance of renewing his incipient disputation with Lady Laura, and he carried a rather heavy heart away from Tilney Street. It is always a little disheartening to be brought face to face with the pranks wrought by perverse destiny.

CHAPTER XXXI

WILFRID IS PRONOUNCED A FAILURE

“OH no,” said Wilfrid, addressing himself, as he sat alone in his library, which had just been vacated by two very long-winded visitors; “that really would be a shade too ridiculous!”

He did not mean that it would be ridiculous on his part to offer himself for re-election in the character of a repentant Gladstonian—which had been the course urged upon him by the two trusted and influential delegates of the Heckingley electorate from whose eloquence he had now been set free. That would, no doubt, be a ridiculous thing to do, and he had politely declined to stultify himself in the manner suggested, declaring that he repented of nothing. But in so declaring he had, of course, spoken merely in a political sense; and, indeed, his attention, during their protracted homily, had strayed far away from them to a retrospect of other matters, which seemed to afford room for a good deal of repentance.

“Why,” Lady Virginia had significantly asked him, in reply to an ejaculation of his, “didn’t you say that last summer?” And he could but regretfully echo the question. “Ah! why didn’t I?” He had not, when he came to look back, been so very far

from proposing to Lady Laura Mayne. He had known—or almost known—that Nora Power would never be his wife; he had been fully alive to the necessity of marrying somebody, and he had certainly preferred Lady Laura to any other marriageable young woman of his acquaintance. It now appeared that his offer, if he had made it at that time, would not have been rejected, and that he might not only have secured a reasonable prospect of happiness for himself, but saved her from what he still regarded as a hideous calamity. But what he proclaimed aloud as too ridiculous was not his unfortunate omission to do the right thing at the right moment; it was a troublesome, insistent idea which kept forcing itself upon him that he had perhaps been mistaken from start to finish—that he had perhaps loved one person all the time, while imagining himself in love with another. His common-sense rebelled against so fantastic a notion. Oh no! Women, it is said, do sometimes deceive themselves after that fashion, but not men. Naturally, he was sorry—sorry for the future Lady Laura Bland, who, as he had been plainly informed, had at one time been inclined to look favorably upon him, and sorry for himself in his present disconsolate and undignified attitude between two stools. But the situation was obviously not one for sighs of a sentimental kind.

Sentimental considerations apart, he was fairly entitled to sigh; and he relieved himself by doing so at frequent intervals. He must indeed have been an optimist if his career, so far as it had gone, had struck him as deserving any other form of comment. His parliamentary career he had virtually destroyed;

for although he was not a Gladstonian, he was by no means sure of being a Unionist, and one must, after all, be adorned with a label of some sort before one can step forward to contest a seat. As for the social career which lies open to a young man of large fortune, such slight efforts as he had made towards embarking upon it had not resulted in much. His acquaintance, which was a tolerably large one, included scarcely any intimate friends; smart society did not attract him in the least, nor were his tastes extravagant; his money was a nuisance and a burden to him. "In short," he concluded, with a rueful laugh, "I'm pretty much where I was when Uncle John died; I see nothing for it but to bolt. Yet one will have to return to domesticity some day, unless one happens to be eaten up by a tiger, and I don't believe I'm even as keen about tigers as I was. All this because one can't help seeing that there are two sides to every question! What a pity that I am not just a little richer and more important! Then I might be given a peerage, and sit on the cross benches, and do some work on committees, and be a more or less useful and resigned member of the community."

Mr. Lethbridge, upon whom he chanced, later in the day, at a club to which they both belonged, spoke to him with slightly sardonic good humor in much the same sense.

"Shake hands, Elles. You've discovered now, as I knew you would, and as I myself discovered some years ago, that they have no use in the House of Commons for an average honest citizen. You're going to chuck it, I suppose?"

“Well,” answered Wilfrid, laughing, “I’m going to be chucked, I believe. My present supporters won’t hear of me unless I do public penance in a white sheet, and overtures from the other side have only been made as a matter of duty, in the evident hope that I should decline them. So I am writing to decline. From all I hear, Mr. Mildmay is likely to be your new member.”

“Poor Mildmay! How he will hate it all!—and what a time he will have of it with Virginia! By the way, are you coming to Virginia’s afternoon squash presently, or are you no longer worthy of being invited?”

Wilfrid had been honored with an invitation, but had not quite made up his mind to take advantage of it, he said.

“Oh, you had better come,” said Mr. Lethbridge; “it will be rather fun. You’ll meet all manner of queer people—Cabinet Ministers, Irish members, newspaper men—the sort of crew that my wife delights to get together every now and then, under the impression that she is establishing a political ‘salon.’ Moreover, I hear that Southfield is to be there, as well as Miss Power. If only Bland could be induced to take this opportunity of asking Southfield his intentions!—but that is too much to hope for, perhaps. Laura, I understand, has been catching it hot from Southfield. Serve her jolly well right, too! Dear me! what an amusing world one lives in when one has the privilege of being Virginia’s husband!”

These disjointed remarks had the effect of persuading Wilfrid to accompany Mr. Lethbridge to Tilney Street, where, as he had been led to expect, he found

himself one of a large crowd of persons who were discussing the political situation to an accompaniment of iced coffee and strawberries and cream. The voice of Sir Samuel Bland rose, predominant and mellifluous, above the general hubbub. He was apparently favoring those near him with an electoral forecast.

“We shall sweep the country,” he was saying, “because the heart of the country is with us; and England’s heart, as all history teaches, has never failed to prove itself mightier than the wisest heads.”

“What,” inquired Wilfrid, who had managed to elbow his way to a corner where Lady Laura was standing, “does that mean?”

“I haven’t the most distant idea,” she replied; “nor, I should imagine, has he. It sounds as if he meant that England had always preferred folly to wisdom; but whether that is the teaching of history or not I can’t remember, I have been so long out of the school-room. Perhaps it doesn’t very much matter.”

“You don’t think that anything matters very much, do you?” asked Wilfrid, raising his eyes for an instant to her beautiful, unimpassioned face, which wore a fixed smile.

“Well,” she answered, “nothing that is happening now will matter a straw fifty years hence, by which time most of us, let us hope, will be in our graves. Still, one can’t help being a little interested and amused by some of the things which are taking place under one’s nose. Just look at Southfield and Miss Bland, for instance! Don’t you call that an interesting and amusing spectacle?”

With a slight motion of her hand she directed his gaze to the couple in question, who were seated, side by side, on a sofa at the opposite end of the room, and who did not appear to be making any great effort towards amusing or interesting each other. Lord Southfield, staring blankly into space and slowly twisting his mustache between his fingers, wore the unmistakable air of one who has been led to the water but will perish of thirst rather than drink, while his neighbor, very red in the face, looked as if tears of anger and mortification were not far from her eyes.

“It certainly is rather funny,” Wilfrid admitted, with a laugh; “but what is he doing it for? Why doesn’t he get up and go away?”

“Oh, it is only people of exceptionally strong character, like yourself, who can get up and go away after receiving orders from Virginia. I suppose you realize that you will never be forgiven?”

“For venturing to differ from your sister and Mr. Gladstone?”

“Not so much for that as for being a failure. It can’t be denied that you are a political failure, and Virginia will have nothing to do with failures. That is why she refuses to know that you are in the room.”

“I should be the last to deny that I am a total and all-round failure,” answered Wilfrid, with a touch of bitterness, “and I am quite willing to be ignored. At the same time, I can’t think, and I am sure you can’t either, that your brother means to gratify Lady Virginia with a success.”

“There’s really no knowing. At the present mo-

ment I should say that a good deal depended upon Miss Power, who, after all, has nothing to gain by being a marplot. It isn't as if Southfield could or would marry her. Don't you think it was rather clever of Virginia to answer malevolent gossips by having her here to-day? Sir Samuel, who admires Virginia much more than he does me, calls it a charming instance of thoughtfulness and true womanliness on her part."

Sir Samuel himself, having concluded his oration, came ambling up at this juncture, and Wilfrid at once moved away. There was no use in being rude to the man, and no possibility of joining politely in a triangular conversation with him and his betrothed.

But what seemed perfectly sensible—if, indeed, it were not absolutely incumbent upon him—was to say a few friendly words, before leaving, to Nora Power, who was talking with much animation to an admiring *entourage* of ladies and gentlemen. She favored him with a smiling gesture of recognition as he drew near; but he had to wait upon the outskirts of the group which surrounded her, and when at length she rose, remarking that she would not have much more than time to get down to the theatre, he doubted whether he would be able to obtain speech of her, after all. He contrived, however, to clear a passage for himself in her wake, and caught her up as she was descending the staircase after taking leave of her hostess.

"Are you bound for home or for the theatre?" he began. "May I escort you part of the way?"

Before she could answer, Southfield, looking eager

and rather pale, was at her elbow. His brougham, he said, was outside; could he drop Miss Power anywhere?

“Oh no, thank you!” she returned, laughing. “Other people, I am afraid, would make haste to drop me if I were seen in a brougham with you. Mr. Elles is different; I feel that I can afford to walk through Mayfair in his company. So we are going to walk—he and I.”

Lord Southfield glanced interrogatively at Wilfrid, and, receiving a slight responsive nod, fell back. He understood, perhaps, that his interests were likely to be better served by his absence than by his presence just then. Nor would he have thought that the confidence which it had pleased him to repose in a man who might so easily have been his rival had been betrayed, if he had overheard the parley which ensued between Wilfrid and Miss Power as soon as they were out in the street.

“I have a recantation to make,” the former began (for he was resolved not to do things by halves). “I was wrong about our friend there, and you were right. I am sorry I tried to make you think badly of him—though, to be sure, I didn’t succeed.”

“One makes so bold as to think for one’s self,” answered Nora, laughing. “I suspect I know quite as well as you what to think of Lord Southfield. But why this sudden change of opinion?”

He told her as well as he could without making indiscreet revelations. He knew now—and he thought that she ought also to know—what Lord Southfield’s feelings and wishes were; he had likewise something to say with regard to Lady Virginia’s feelings and

wishes ; in a word—or rather in a good many words—he endeavored to make the actual position of affairs clear, and to point out that their future course lay at the mercy of one, and only one, person.

“Thank you,” said Nora, when he had finished, “it is very kind of you to have taken all this trouble. But, did you think you were telling me any news ?”

He made a despondent gesture.

“I am so dense !”

“I won’t contradict you ; though I like you none the worse for that. Of course, Lord Southfield wants to marry me ; I don’t know whether you will understand that my not wanting to marry him is quite as much a matter of course. I am sorry about Miss Bland, who is plain and vulgar, and will give him some bad quarters of an hour ; but what would you have ? I really can’t put my pride into my pocket so far as to deliver him from her. Let him deliver himself, if he is eager enough for liberty to think it worth some temporary bother. If not, the money-bags must be his compensation.”

“I dare say that will be his view, if you refuse him. But will you be wise to refuse him ?”

“You would have to define wisdom before I could answer. I may tell you, though, that no earthly consideration would ever induce me to accept him. Even if I were wasting away for love of him—and I don’t look very much like that, do I ?—I should say the same. Just imagine the figure that I should cut ! The Irish adventuress, who had been plotting and scheming all this time to capture a coronet ; the viper whom poor Lady Virginia had been warming in her bosom !”

“That is absurd! You are just as well born as he is, and nobody could dare to call you an adventuress.”

“H’m! one can’t be sure; there is so much audacity about. Even you yourself, some people might think, are displaying a certain amount of it now; considering, I mean, that it isn’t such a very long time since you professed to be eager to marry me to quite another person.”

“I am eager,” answered Wilfrid, reddening slightly, “for your happiness.”

“I see. And was it my father or Lord Southfield—or both of them, perhaps?—who begged you to overcome my perversity, if you could? Never mind! you have done your best, and I am grateful to you. I am, really and truly. To prove it, I will give you one word of good advice, in return for yours. Lady Laura Mayne isn’t Lady Laura Bland yet; I doubt whether she ever will be, unless you wish it. I should wish her to have another surname, if I were you—and I should tell her so. Now stop a hansom for me, please; I haven’t time for any more walking or talking.”

CHAPTER XXXII

DEFEATS AND VICTORIES

ON a fine, warm morning towards the end of July, Mr. Lethbridge was reclining luxuriously in a long cane chair beneath the shelter of a tent which had been erected upon his lawn at Heckingley. Only a few hours before he had arrived from Norway, whither he had betaken himself to kill salmon and escape the turmoil of a general election; he had now had a bath and his breakfast, and the *Times*, which he was perusing through intermittent clouds of cigarette smoke, afforded him pleasant reading. During the period of his absence events, public and domestic, had occurred which entitled him to wear a smile of placid satisfaction, not unmingled with a shade of malice.

“Lord!” he murmured, “what a joke it all is! Or, to speak more accurately, what a capital joke it would be if one were just a little bit further removed from the scene! Virginia looked beautifully unconcerned just now; but that, of course, was only because appearances had to be kept up in the presence of the servants. I take it that she will be here in a very few minutes, and then—well, then one will be apt to require all one’s philosophy and admirable self-control.”

To him, in accordance with anticipation, presently

entered the lady of the house, holding a batch of letters and telegrams in her hand. She seated herself beside her husband, and began :

“ Now, then, Tom ! ”

“ Now, then, Virginia ! *Place aux dames*, you know.”

“ No ; I'll wait to hear what you have to say first. It is sure to be something nice, and you are evidently dying to say it.”

“ I always try to be nice,” Mr. Lethbridge declared. “ What prevents me doing justice to myself is that I am so subject to attacks of unseasonable giggling. I remember to have been frequently whipped, when a boy, in consequence of that constitutional infirmity. And there's a completeness about this—about your defeat, I mean—which would tickle the most sombre of mankind. You'll bear that in mind, won't you ?—and you'll understand that any passing excess of what may strike you as unfeeling hilarity implies no lack of sincere condolence ? ”

“ Go on ; I wouldn't interfere with your enjoyment for the world ! ”

“ Thanks, very much ! Well, to begin with, we have the total collapse of your revered leader, and the final extinction of his impossible Home Rule scheme.”

“ Don't you be too sure about collapses and extinctions. Great questions are not settled by a single election.”

“ Not even when the clear-sighted and intellectual agricultural laborer takes part in them ? Anyhow, you are out in the cold for some years to come—you

and your Home Rulers. That is pretty well, as it stands; but it sinks almost into insignificance by comparison with the successful revolt of Southfield. Of course, I don't know; but I should have said that if ever you were certain of anything in this world, you were certain of being able to prevent him from marrying that girl. Yet he is actually going to marry her, it appears, and Miss Bland may wear the willow."

"Nora Power will be no discredit to him," said Lady Virginia. "I am glad I took her up last season. It is a pity that she has no money; still she is entirely respectable. And there was always the chance of Southfield marrying somebody not in the least respectable."

Mr. Lethbridge took the liberty of indulging in one of the laughs for which he had pleaded permission.

"And to crown all," he added, "here is Laura kicking over the traces at the last moment, and dismissing the venerable Samuel with a flea in his ear! You are not going to pretend, I hope, that that little incident hasn't given you a rather nasty jar."

"I never did like the Blands," remarked Lady Virginia, meditatively. "For political reasons, one had to be friendly with them; but they are horribly vulgar people, and I am glad to think that they may now be quietly dropped."

"Your sentiments, dear Virginia, are my own. But I must say that I never should have suspected you of entertaining them."

"Ah, but then you never suspect anything that

isn't thrust in bold black and white under your very nose. I may make occasional mistakes and miscalculations—I don't deny that Southfield has rather astonished me—but I really am not quite the goose that you take me for in your haste."

Lady Virginia added, demurely, after a short pause :

"I have just had a telegram from Mr. Elles. He is coming down for a few days, and he will be here this afternoon."

Mr. Lethbridge whistled.

"Oh!" said he; "that's it, is it?"

"I'm sure I don't know; I hope so. At all events, even you, Tom, matter-of-fact as you are, must know quite well why Laura accepted old Bland—and why she has thrown him over."

"I am not sure that I understand her motives for throwing him over. She accepted him, of course, because you insisted upon it."

"No such thing! She says she was obliged to break off the engagement because he has a way of clearing his throat every other minute which she could never hope to be able to live in the house with. As a reason—well, it is a reason."

Mr. Lethbridge stuck his hands in his pockets, gazed up at the canvas roof above his head, blew a cloud of cigarette smoke, and chuckled.

"Poor Elles!" he remarked.

But it is not certain that the ex-member for the Heckingley division, who was at that moment in a railway-carriage, on his way down to the district he had ceased to represent, was so very much to be pitied. It is true that he was still sorry for himself, and still under the impression that he had made

an unmitigated failure of his life, so far as it had gone; yet recent occurrences had been of a more or less consolatory nature to him. Politically, he was able to feel that his action had been approved and confirmed by a majority of his fellow-countrymen, while in the category of private affairs he had nothing but the most sincere congratulations to offer to himself and his friends. He had heard with genuine pleasure and without a single jealous pang how Lord Southfield's wooing had prospered, and his pocket contained letters from Mr. Power, as well as from the affianced couple, which contained all that could be desired in the shape of explanations. They were all three at Rathfinnan; stage triumphs were a mere memory; certain other matters did not seem to be even as much as that; and the wedding was to take place in the autumn. Nora, to be sure, had the grace to make some allusion to the disdainful repudiation of her future husband which she had announced not so very long before.

"But I dare say you will understand," she wrote, "that one doesn't always mean exactly everything that one says—you ought to be able to understand that, if anybody ought!—and I have been brought to see how silly and wicked it would be of me to throw away all I care for on account of the fears which I mentioned to you that afternoon. Southfield says, truly enough, that he will have a much worse time than I shall, and he is prepared to face it. So I have changed my mind, and if you like to smile, you may. I am delighted to hear that Lady Laura Mayne has changed hers. Perhaps you may find something to smile at in that also."

Now, it is a fact that Wilfrid, while musing in the corner of the railway-carriage, had a smile, indicative of moderate contentment, upon his lips. It was undeniably pleasant to have been summoned, in the friendliest fashion, to a house which he had scarcely expected to visit again, and to have received that proof that a lady to whom he was much attached did not propose to decline his future acquaintance by reason of his somewhat ignominious retirement from public life. Legitimate satisfaction belonged also to the prospect of hearing from Lady Laura Mayne the story of her rupture with Sir Samuel Bland. For as yet he knew no more than the bare fact that the engagement was off.

He was informed, on his arrival, that the ladies were in the tent on the lawn; but it so happened that he found only one of them there, and her surprise at the sight of him was so obvious as to be a little embarrassing.

“I really was invited,” he felt bound to state, after shaking hands. “Wasn’t I expected?”

“Not by me,” Lady Laura replied, with a slight laugh; “but Virginia has only gone down to the walled garden, and will be back presently. I never know what visitors are expected in this house,” she added, by way of excusing herself.

“Then I suppose,” said Wilfrid, “you looked so astonished because I am such a very improbable person to have been asked to this house.”

“Well, you have made yourself a little bit improbable nowadays, haven’t you? Not the less welcome, though. Won’t you sit down?”

Beneath her outward composure there was a sugges-

tion of nervousness which he did not fail to discern. He himself was absurdly nervous ; so much so that he was fain to discourse for a considerable length of time about the discomfiture of Mr. Gladstone before he found courage to allude to that of Sir Samuel Bland. But Sir Samuel, it appeared, had not been at all discomfited.

“Our rupture,” Lady Laura said, “was the simplest and easiest thing in the world. I told him that I was really ashamed of myself, and he begged me not to mention it. The truth was that he was only too glad to be off his bargain. For a week or more I had been doing all I knew to convince him that if he married me he would marry a species of malignant idiot, and he was thoroughly frightened. Then, of course, he was furious about Southfield. I believe he afterwards gave Virginia to understand that he had had more than enough of us, as a family. But Virginia is rather reticent about that final interview.”

After an interval of silence, Wilfrid ingenuously resumed :

“I wonder what made your sister offer hospitality to an apostate like me ! I was fully prepared to be struck out of her visiting-list for the future.”

Lady Laura burst out laughing.

“Oh, come, Mr. Elles ! surely you know Virginia well enough to guess why you are here, and you and I know one another well enough, I hope, to enjoy the joke. At one time, as you must be quite well aware, Virginia was kind enough to offer you to me as an alternative to Sir Samuel Bland. Sir Samuel being now disqualified, she naturally falls back upon her second string. That really need not make either of

us uncomfortable. You are certainly not going to make me an offer of marriage, and if you were, I should respectfully decline the honor ; so there's no harm done."

By means of what clumsy asseverations (he was afterwards assured that they had been phenomenally clumsy) Wilfrid managed to convince Lady Laura that an offer of marriage was the very thing which he was bent upon making he hardly knew. He was a good deal agitated and impeded by a sense that his statements were not, upon the face of them, such as to commend ready credence. But nothing could have been more direct, unequivocal and final than the refusal with which his halting eloquence was met.

"Not if my life depended upon it!" Lady Laura declared. "No; not even if you really desired this as much as you don't. A *marriage de convenance*—well, perhaps I shouldn't have said no; for we have always got on pretty well together. But from the moment that you begin pretending to be in love with me—"

"It's no pretence; it's strict, sober reality!" Wilfrid eagerly declared. "I want to be perfectly honest, so I won't deny that I loved Miss Power once. Never mind how much or how little; I only say that I loved her once, and that I love you now. Can't you believe that?"

The girl smiled.

"Suppose we strike a bargain?" she suggested. "I will try to believe in your anxiety to marry me if you will be so good as to believe that—notwithstanding anything you may have been told—I haven't the shadow of a wish to marry you."

But, as this did not happen to be the truth, and as, in cases where the tender passion is concerned, truth is apt to show itself great and prevail, Lady Virginia, on her return from the walled garden, received a piece of intelligence which pleased without surprising her.

“It has taken some manœuvring to make a happy man of you,” she observed to Wilfrid, some hours later; “but I flatter myself that the fact may now be regarded as accomplished.”

“Really, this is a little too much!” exclaimed Wilfrid, laughing. “I confess to being happy; but I can’t allow you, of all people, to claim credit for having taken the yoke of parliamentary life off my neck and having delivered poor Laura from the jaws of the monster, Bland.”

“I claim credit for having moulded you,” Lady Virginia rejoined, coolly. “But for me, you wouldn’t yet have discovered what you are—a good fellow, but a hopelessly inept politician—and you would have wasted many years in the House of Commons which you will now employ much more pleasantly and profitably as a country gentleman. As for Sir Samuel Bland, it was you, not I, who made him inevitable. I meant you for Laura all along, only you chose to misunderstand.”

She shrugged her shoulders and smiled retrospectively. We all have our weak points, and if Lady Virginia Lethbridge was under the impression that nine men out of every ten to whom she made friendly advances fell victims to her personal attractiveness, nobody who knew her during the period with which this narrative has dealt will be dis-

posed to call that assumption a very extravagant one.

“Tom,” she resumed, presently, “has been condoling with me upon what he is pleased to call the completeness of my defeat; and I am sure that you are of one mind with him. But you are both mistaken; I am not a bit defeated. Nor is Home Rule.”

“For the present, surely!”

“Oh, for the present, yes. Like Catholic Emancipation and the repeal of the Corn Laws, and the extension of the suffrage and every other just and generous measure which has had to wait. But it is quite certain to come: a policy of mere resistance never wins.”

“Meanwhile the great Liberal party has ceased to exist.”

“Well, everything and everybody must die some day. I hope you won’t die before the Irish Parliament assembles again in College Green, for I don’t wish Laura to be a young widow.”

“So long as I am not called upon to vote for it!”

“You couldn’t sum yourself up more admirably or concisely. And you won’t be called upon to vote for or against it; I foresee that nothing will ever drive you back into Parliament. You are going to be a happy, healthy, humdrum being, with a wife who will approve unconditionally of everything that you do and say.”

“There is a cocksureness about your predictions, Virginia,” remarked Mr. Lethbridge, who had strolled across the room in time to overhear the concluding portion of the above dialogue, “which is most cheer-

ing and enlivening to a man who, like myself, is upon the confines of middle age. *Qui vivre verre.* In the smoking-room, Elles, are cooling drinks. Let us go and bury our heads in them, for the necessities of the present must be attended to, and the future belongs neither to you nor to me, nor even to Virginia."

See Myra Uella

THE END

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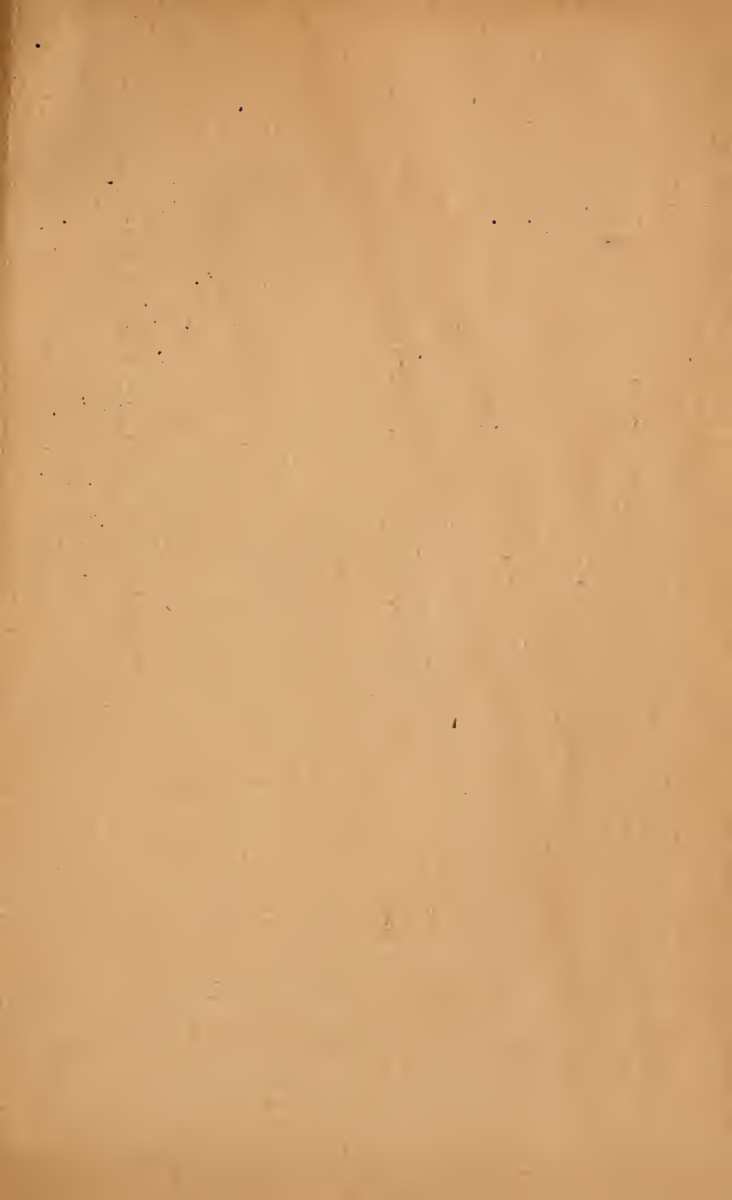
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